FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

THE DESERT OF LOVE

(LE DESERT DE L'AMOUR)

— and —

THE ENEMY

(LE MAL)

TRANSLATED BY

GERARD HOPKINS

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I

FOR years Raymond Courrèges had been cherishing the hope that one day he might run across Maria Cross, the woman on whom he had so ardently longed to be revenged. Often in the street he would follow some chance passer-by, thinking to have found her. But in the course of time the edge of his resentment had become blunted, so that when, at length, they did come face to face, he felt, at first, none of that joy shot with fury which such a meeting should have stirred in him.

It was only ten o'clock when he entered the bar in the rue Duphot. The coloured jazz-band was playing softly for the delectation of a solitary waiter. Over the tiny floor which, when midnight came, would be crammed with dancing couples, a ventilating fan was making a noise like a gigantic bluebottle. To the doorman, who said, with a look of surprise, "Don't often see you here as early as this, sir," he replied with no more than a wave of the hand, which conveyed a wish that something should be done to stop this intrusive bumbling. The man did his best to explain, confidentially, but without success, that the new system "absorbed the smoke without causing a draught." Courrèges gave him such a look that he beat a hasty retreat to the cloak-room. Up in the ceiling the ventilator droned to silence, as though a bee had suddenly alighted.

The young man sat down at one of the tables, thus breaking the immaculate vista of white cloths. A glance in a mirror showed him that he was not looking his best. 'What's the matter with me?' he wondered. God!—how he hated a wasted evening—and all because of that swine Eddy H——. He had had to dig the fellow out and almost drag him to a restaurant. During dinner Eddy had scarcely listened to what he was saying, and had excused his inattention on the ground of a sick-headache.

He had sat perched on the very edge of his chair, impatience in every line of his body, obviously preoccupied with the thought of some happiness to come. No sooner had he finished his coffee than he had taken eagerly to his heels—eyes shining, ears flushed and nostrils flaring. Raymond had spent the day in delighted anticipation of their dinner and of the evening that was to follow it. But, no doubt, Eddy had in prospect pleasures more stimulating than any offered by a mere exchange of confidences.

Courrèges was amazed to find that he felt not only disappointed and humiliated, but also sad. The discovery that the companionship of a friend to whom he attached no particular importance could show as thus precious to him, came as a shock. It was something entirely new in his life. Up to the age of thirty, being quite incapable of the selflessness demanded by true friendship, and devoting much of his attention to women, he had disregarded everything that was not an object to be possessed, and, like a greedy child, would have said, had he put the feeling into words, "I like only what I can eat." At that period of his life he made use of his cronies either as witnesses of his conquests or as recipients of his confidences. He looked on a friend as, first and foremost, a pair of ears. He liked, too, the feeling that he could dominate them and control their actions. Influencing others had become a passion with him. He flattered himself that he had reduced the demoralizing of his companions to a fine art.

Raymond Courrèges could have built up a big career for himself, as his grandfather the surgeon had done; his uncle, the Jesuit, and his father, the doctor, if only he had been capable of harnessing his appetites to work, if only his natural tastes had not led him to concentrate all his energies on the achievement of immediate satisfaction. But by now he was reaching the age at which only those who address themselves to the soul can set their dominance on a firm foundation. The best that Courrèges could do for his disciples was to assure them a quick yield in terms of pleasure. But the younger men of his acquaintance

preferred to share their adventures with others of their own age, and his circle was growing thin. In the preserves of love there is no shortage of game, but we soon find that the little group of those in whose company we set out grows smaller year by year. Those who had survived the dark violence of the war had either dwindled into husbands or had their natures distorted by the pursuit of a calling. He noted their greying hair, their protuberant bellies, their bald pates, and hated them because they were the same age as himself. He accused them of having murdered their youth, of having betrayed it even before it had fled from them.

It was a matter of pride with him to be taken for a "post-war product"; and this evening, in the still empty bar, where the only sound was the muted thrumming of a mandolin (the flame of the melody rising, falling, flickering), he studied with fierce attention the image thrown back at him from the mirrors, the image of a face with a thatch of vigorous hair on which his thirty-five years had not yet set their mark. It came to him, as he pondered, that age would lay hands upon his life long before it touched his body. If it bolstered up his self-esteem to hear women say among themselves—"Who's that tall young man?" he knew that the keener-eyed twenty-year-olds no longer thought of him as forming one in their ephemeral group. Maybe Eddy had had something better to do than talk about himself to an accompaniment of wailing saxophones; on the other hand, he might be doing just that at this very moment in some other bar, laying bare his heart to some youth born in 1904, who would constantly interrupt the flow of his talk with "me, too," and "that's just what I feel. . . ."

A number of young men began to drift in. They had assumed expressions of self-conscious arrogance preparatory to crossing the floor, and were now, at sight of the empty room, visibly embarrassed. They gathered in a little cluster round the barman. But Courrèges had made it a rule never to let himself suffer because of the behaviour of others—whether mistresses or friends. True, therefore, to this principle, he set himself to stress

the lack of proportion existing between the insignificance of Eddy H——, and the feeling of uneasy restlessness which was the legacy left behind after that young man's defection. . . . He was pleased to find that this weed of sentiment, when he tried to pull it out, came away without any difficulty. He wound himself up to the pitch of thinking how little it would mean to him, next day, to show his friend the door. He even contemplated without concern the possibility that he might never set eyes on him again. It was almost with a sense of gaiety that he thought: "I'll wash my hands of him once and for all." He sighed with relief, only to find that a sense of unease remained which had nothing whatever to do with Eddy. . . . Ah, yes, of course, that letter! He could feel it in the pocket of his evening jacket. No point in reading it again. Dr. Courrèges, in communicating with his son, made use of a telegraphic brevity of expression which was easily remembered:

> Staying at Grand Hotel duration Medical Congress. Available mornings before nine, evenings after eleven.
>
> Your father,
>
> PAUL COURRÈGES.

"Not if I know it!" he murmured, unaware that his face had taken on an expression of defiance. He held it against this father of his that it was less easy to despise him than the other members of the family. On reaching the age of thirty, Raymond had demanded a lump-sum down comparable to what his sister had received on her marriage. But in vain. Faced by the parental refusal, he had burned his boats and taken himself off. But it was Madame Courrèges who held the purse-strings, and he knew perfectly well that his father would have acted generously by him had he been in a legal position to do so, and that money meant nothing to the old man. "Not if I know it!" he said to himself once more, but could not, for all that, help catching the note of appeal which sounded in the dry little message. He was far less blind than was Madame Courrèges, who felt only irrita-

tion at her husband's undemonstrative nature and brusque manner. "He may be a good man, and he may have a heart of gold," she was fond of saying, "but what good is that to me if I never get a glimpse of it? Just think what he would be like if he was *bad*!"

Just because it was so difficult to hate his father, Raymond found these claims upon his affection hard to endure. He wasn't going to answer the letter . . . all the same. . . . Later, when he thought back to the circumstances of this evening, he remembered the bitterness of his mood when he entered the deserted little bar, but forgot what had caused it—the defection of a friend called Eddy, and his father's presence in Paris. He believed that his sour ill-temper had been born of a presentiment, and that a connexion existed between the state of his emotions, on that occasion, and the event which was fast approaching. He has always since maintained that neither Eddy nor the doctor were, in themselves, capable of getting him worked up like that, but that, from the very moment he had settled down with a cocktail, some inner voice, some clamour of the flesh, had warned him of the imminent appearance of the woman who, at that same moment, in a taxi which had already reached the corner of the rue Duphot, was rummaging in her little bag, and saying to her companion:

"What a bore! I've forgotten my lipstick!"

To which the man replied, "There'll probably be one in the ladies' room."

"What a foul idea! one might catch . . ."

"Well then, get Gladys to lend you hers."

* * * * *

She came into the bar. A "cloche" hat completely obliterated the top part of her face, leaving visible only her chin, that feature on which time sets the sign-manual of age. Forty years had, here and there, touched this nether segment of her countenance, drawing the skin tight and sketching a hint of sagging

flesh. Her body beneath its furs must, one felt, be shrunken. As blind as a bull brought suddenly from its dark pen into the glare of the arena, she stopped short on the threshold of the glittering room. When her companion, who had been delayed by a dispute over the fare, rejoined her, Courrèges, though not at once recognizing him, said to himself: "I've seen that fellow somewhere—bet he comes from Bordeaux": and then, all of a sudden, as he looked at the face of the man of fifty, swollen, as it were, by the sense of its own identity, a name formed itself on his lips: Victor Larousselle. . . . With beating heart he resumed his examination of the woman who, quickly realizing that no one else was wearing a hat, had taken off hers, and was shaking out her freshly cropped hair in front of a mirror. He saw, first of all, a pair of eyes that were large and calm: next, a wide forehead, its limits sharply marked by the seven youthful points of her dark hair. All that remained of the legacy of youth seemed concentrated in the upper part of her face. Raymond recognized her in spite of the short hair, the middle-aged "spread," and nature's slow work of destruction, which, beginning at the neck, was busy invading the areas of mouth and cheeks. He recognized her as he would have done a road familiar to him in childhood, even though the oaks once shading it had been cut down. He calculated the lapse of time. The sum took him a bare two seconds. 'She's forty-four,' he thought: 'I was eighteen and she was twenty-seven.' Like all those who confound the ideas of happiness and youth, he had a consciousness of the passage of time which was ever active, strive, though he might, to keep it muffled. His eye was for ever measuring the sundering gulf of the dead years. He at once inserted in life's chronology every human being who had played a part in his existence. No sooner did he see a face than he could supply a date.

'Will she recognize me?' But would she have so sharply turned away if she had not already done so? She went up to her companion and seemed to be begging him not to stay, for he replied very loudly, and in the tone of a man who craves an

admiring audience, "What nonsense! it's not a bit gloomy. In a quarter of an hour it'll be as tight packed as an egg with meat!" He pushed out a table not far from the one at which Raymond was leaning on his elbow, and sat down heavily. The blood had rushed to his face, sure sign of hardening arteries. But apart from that its expression was one of unruffled satisfaction. The woman was still standing motionless. "What are you waiting for?" he asked. Gone, suddenly, from the eyes, from the coarse and purplish lips, was all look of pleasure. In what he thought was a low voice, he said: "It's enough for me to like being here for you to start sulking—of course!" She must have told him to be careful, have warned him that he could be overheard, for his next words were almost shouted: "So I don't know how to behave, don't I?—What does it matter if they *do* hear?"

Seated not far from Raymond, the woman seemed to have recovered her composure. In order to see her the young man would have had to lean forward. It was for her now to avoid his eyes. He realized her renewed sense of security, and was made suddenly aware, with a quick feeling of terror, that the opportunity which, for the last seventeen years, he had so eagerly desired, might slip through his fingers. He thought that he was still, after all that time, determined to humiliate the woman who had so deeply humiliated him, to show her what manner of man he was—the sort that doesn't let a bitch get the better of him without hitting back. For years he had found pleasure in thinking what would happen when fate at last should bring them face to face, how he would skilfully contrive matters so as to ride rough-shod over, and reduce to tears, the woman in whose presence he had once cut so ridiculous a figure. . . . Doubtless, if to-night he had recognized not this woman, but some other trivial familiar of his eighteenth year—the boon companion of that distant time, the miserable usher whom he had loathed—he would, at sight of them, have found in himself no trace either of the affection or of the hatred which the callow schoolboy, now outgrown, had then felt. But, faced by this woman, did he

not feel now just as he had felt on that Thursday evening of 19—, when he had walked in the fading light along a dusty suburban road smelling of lilies, and stopped before a gate whose bell would never again ring to the pressure of his finger? Maria! Maria Cross! Of the shy and grubby youth he had been then, she had made a new man, the man he was to be for ever after. How little she had changed! The same questioning eyes, the same radiant forehead. Courrèges reminded himself that his favourite school friend of 19— would, by this time, be heavy, prematurely bald and bearded. But the faces of a certain type of woman remain steeped in childhood until well on into maturity, and it is that quality of childhood, perhaps, that produces in us a fixation of love kept inviolate from the weapons of time. There she was, as she had always been, after seventeen years of passions about which he knew nothing, like one of those black Virgins whose smile the flaming fanaticisms of Reform and Revolution have been powerless to change. She was still being "kept" by this same man of substance who was noisily venting his ill-humour and impatience because the people for whom he was waiting had not yet turned up.

"I expect it's Gladys as usual who's making them late. . . . I'm always on the dot myself. . . . can't stand unpunctuality in others. I suppose I'm odd in that way. I just can't bear the thought of keeping other people waiting—some sort of an instinct, I suppose—no use fighting against it. But good manners are a thing of the past. . . ."

Maria Cross laid a hand on his shoulder, and must have said again: "Everyone can hear what you're saying," because he growled out that he wasn't saying anything he minded people hearing, and that it really was a bit much *her* teaching *him* how to behave.

Her mere presence had the effect of delivering Courrèges bound hand and foot to the vanished past. Though he had always had a keen sense of days long gone, he had a hatred of reviving the memory of their details, and feared nothing so

much as the shuffle of ghosts. But he could do nothing this evening to disperse the crowding procession of faces brought by Maria's presence to the surface of his consciousness. He could hear again, in memory, the clock striking six, and the banging of desk-lids in Upper School. Not enough rain had fallen to lay the dust: the light in the tram was too bad for him to finish reading *Aphrodite*—in the tram filled with workpeople to whose faces the exhaustion of another day had imparted a look of gentleness.

II

HE was a grubby brat. Much of his time at school he spent being turned out of the class-room, wandering about the passages or leaning against old walls. When he left it of an evening, and before he got to his suburban home, there was a long interval of time, spent, most of it, in the tram, which stood in his mind for freedom, for deliverance. At last he could feel himself alone, surrounded by indifferent faces and incurious eyes. Especially was this so in winter, because then the darkness, shredded only at intervals by scattered street-lamps and the glare of occasional bars, shut him away from the world, isolated him in a universe that reeked of damp working-clothes. Dead cigarettes dangled from sagging lips; faces seamed with coal-dust lay tilted back in sleep; newspapers slipped from hands gone numb; a hatless woman held up her novelette to catch the light of the lamps, her lips moving as though in prayer. But the end of the journey came at last, and, just after they had passed the church at Talence, he had to get out.

The tram—a moving Bengal Candle—lit up for a few brief moments the yews and naked elm branches of a private park. Then the boy heard the noise of the trolley-wheels diminish as he stood in the puddle-pocked road. His nose was filled with the scent of rotting wood and leaves. He turned up the lane that ran

by the Courrèges garden wall, and pushed open the half-closed gate leading to the backyard. The light from the dining-room window lay across a clump of bushes where, in Spring, the fuchsias were planted, because they love the shade. At this point in the return journey his face took on the sullen look it wore at school; his eyebrows drew together till they showed as a single matted line above his eyes, and the right-hand corner of his mouth began to droop. Entering the drawing-room he threw a collective "good evening" to the occupants who sat grouped about a single niggardly lamp. His mother asked how often must he be told to wipe his feet on the scraper, and did he mean to sit down to dinner with his hands "like that"? Madame Courrèges, the elder, murmured to her daughter-in-law: "You know what Paul says: don't nag the boy unnecessarily." His very appearance seemed to start an exchange of bitter words.

He sat down where the light could not reach him.

Crouched over her embroidery, Madeleine Basque, his sister, had not so much as raised her head at his entrance. He was of less interest to her, he thought, than the dog. In her opinion, Raymond was the family's "running sore." "I don't like to think what *he'll* grow up into," she was for ever saying, to which her husband, Gaston Basque, would contribute his mite by adding: "It's all because his father's so weak."

She would look up from her work, sit for a moment with her ears pricked, say suddenly, "There's Gaston," and lay aside her task. "*I* don't hear a thing," Madame Courrèges would remark. But—"Yes, it's him," the young woman would repeat, and then, though no sound had reached any ear but her own, would run out on to the terrace and disappear into the garden, guided by an infallible instinct, as though she belonged to a species of animal different from all others, where it was the male, and not the female, who exhaled the odour that would draw his partner to him through the darkness. In a moment or two the Courrèges would hear a man's voice followed by Madeleine's gratified and submissive laughter. They knew that the couple would not come

back through the drawing-room, but would use a side-door and go straight upstairs to the bedroom floor, from which they would not descend until the gong had been sounded twice.

The company round the dining-room table, beneath the hanging lamp, consisted of the elder Madame Courrèges, her daughter-in-law, Lucie Courrèges, the young couple and their four little girls, all with their father's reddish hair, all dressed alike, all with the same complexion and the same patches of freckles. They sat huddled together like tame birds on a perch. "No one's to say a word to them," ordered Lieutenant Basque. "If anyone addresses them, it's they who'll be punished. Now don't say I didn't warn you."

The doctor's chair remained empty for some considerable time, even when he happened to be at home. He would come in half-way through the meal, carrying a bundle of learned journals. His wife said, hadn't he heard the gong? and complained that with everything in the house at sixes and sevens, it was quite impossible to keep any servant for long. Shaking his head, as though to chase away a fly, he proceeded to bury himself in one of his journals. This was not affectation on his part, but merely a way of saving time devised by a man who was in a constant condition of over-work, never free from worries, and fully aware that every minute was precious. At the other end of the table, the Basques sat isolated and aloof, supremely indifferent to everything that did not directly concern either them or their little ones. Gaston would be explaining how he was pulling strings to avoid being moved from Bordeaux, how the Colonel had written to the Ministry . . . his attentive wife all the while keeping a watchful eye on the children and maintaining an uninterrupted flow of educative comment: "Don't you know how to use a knife?" "Don't sprawl." "Keep your hands on the table—hands, I said, not elbows." "Now mind what I say, you won't get any more bread." "You've had quite enough to drink already."

The Basques formed an island of secrecy and suspicion. "They

never tell me anything"—all Madame Courrèges' grievances against her daughter could be summed up in that phrase—"they never tell me anything." She suspected that Madeleine was pregnant, kept a careful eye on her figure, and drew her own conclusions when the girl complained of not feeling well. The servants, she maintained, always knew everything before she did. She believed that Gaston had taken out an insurance policy on his life, but for how much? She had no idea what money they had come into on old Basque's death.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, when she grumblingly enquired whether Raymond hadn't any home-work to do, any essay to write, he made no answer. He would take hold of one of the little girls, look as though he were about to crush her in his great hands, toss her up over his head so that she could touch the ceiling, and swing the lithe little body round and round, while Madeleine Basque, like a ruffled and uneasy hen—though disarmed by the child's excitement, would exclaim: "*Do* be careful; I'm sure you'll do her some injury," and then, turning to the company in general, would remark: "He's so *rough*," at which, Grandmamma Courrèges, laying down her knitting and pushing up her spectacles, while her whole face crinkled into a smile, would at once embark on a brisk defence of Raymond: "Why, he *adores* children," she would say. "You can't deny that children are all he cares about . . ." for it was one of the old lady's convictions that he wouldn't be so devoted to them if he hadn't a heart of gold. "You've only got to see him with his nieces to realize that there's nothing really to worry about."

But did he really care so very much about children? The truth was he made use of anything that came his way, provided it was warm and living, as a weapon against those whom he called the "corpses." Depositing the young body on the sofa, he would, on these occasions, make for the door, rush from the house and stride along the leaf-encumbered paths.

Between the branches a lighter patch of sky guided his steps. Doctor Courrèges' lamp glowed from behind a window on the

first floor. Should he go to bed without looking in on his father to say good-night? The three-quarters of an hour of hostile silence each morning were, alas! all that he could stand. Every day, early, the brougham set out, carrying father and son. Raymond got out at the Barrière de Saint-Genès, whence he walked, by way of the Boulevards, to school, while the doctor continued on to the hospital. For three-quarters of an hour they sat side by side in a smell of ancient leather, between streaming windows. The practitioner, who a few moments later, would be speaking eloquently, authoritatively, to his helpers and his students, had been vainly seeking, for months, some word that should provoke a response from this being of his own flesh and blood. How was he ever to succeed in blazing a path to this heart which was always bristling with defences? Each time he congratulated himself on finding a joint in the young man's armour, and began speaking to Raymond in phrases planned long in advance, his words seemed suddenly like the words of a stranger: his very voice, dry and mocking, had, he felt, turned traitor—no matter how hard he tried to make it sound natural. This powerlessness to give expression to his feelings was his habitual martyrdom.

It was only through his actions that Dr. Courrèges' kindness of heart was widely recognized, for they alone bore witness to the good that lay so deeply embedded in him that it was like a man entombed. He could never hear a word of gratitude without a growl and a shrug. Bumping along through rainy dawns beside his son, he was for ever addressing silent questions to the withdrawn and sullen face there at his elbow. In spite of himself he could not help interpreting the signs that showed upon that face as those of some dark angel—the deceptive sweetness, for instance, that he caught in eyes that were more deeply shadowed than they should have been. 'The poor boy regards me as his enemy,' thought the father, 'and the fault is mine, not his.' But he was reckoning without the sure instinct for those who love him which is for ever active in the adolescent. Raymond

heard the unvoiced appeal, and never confused his father with the others. But he deliberately turned a deaf ear to what never found release in words. Nor could he, on his side, have thought of anything to say to the victim of shyness at his side, for the effect of his presence was to numb the older man with timidity, and so turn him to ice. Nevertheless, the doctor could not refrain, now and again, from remonstrating with him, though he always did so as gently as possible, and in terms of a friendship between equals.

"I've had another letter about you from the headmaster. Poor Abbé Farge, you'll really send him out of his mind! It seems to be proved without a shadow of doubt that it was you who passed round that treatise on obstetrics—I suppose you sneaked it off my shelves. I must confess that his air of outraged virtue seems to me somewhat excessive. After all, you're old enough now to know about the facts of life, and it's a good deal better that you should get them from solid, scientific books. That's the line I took in my reply. . . . But I gather, too, that a number of *La Gaudriole* was found in the newspaper rack in Upper School, and, very naturally, you are under suspicion. All the sins of Israel are laid to your charge. Better look out, my boy, or you'll find yourself expelled with the final exams. still a good six months off."

"No."

"What d'you mean—no?"

"Because I'm working extra hard and stand a good chance of not being ploughed a second time. I know their sort! They're not going to get rid of the only chap who's likely to pass. Besides, if they showed me the door, the Jesuits would snap me up in a jiffy! They'd far rather let me go on contaminating the others, as they put it, than run the risk of losing a good item in the school records. Think how triumphant old Farge'll look on Speech Day: thirty candidates—twenty-three 'Honours' and two 'Passes.' . . . Thunderous applause. . . . What a lot of swine they are!"

"No, my boy, that's where you're wrong." The doctor stressed those words "my boy." Now, perhaps, was his opportunity to penetrate the lad's stubborn heart. For a long time his son had obstinately refused to show the slightest sign of weakening. The glow of a trusting confidence showed through the cynical words. What should he say that might have the effect, without putting the boy on the defensive, of proving to him that there *are* men who don't resort to tricks and calculations, that sometimes the cleverest are those Machiavellis of high causes who wound us when they wish us well? . . . He felt about in his mind for the most suitable formula, and even while he pondered the problem, the suburban road had turned into a city street filled with the bright and melancholy radiance of morning and the jostle of milk-carts. A few moments more and they would reach the city limits, that Croix de Saint-Genès where once the pilgrims to St. James of Compostella had knelt in momentary adoration, and where now only bus inspectors leaned against the walls. Unable to find any suitable words, he took the other's warm hand in his, said in a low voice, "My boy," . . . and then noticed that Raymond, his head pressed to the window, was asleep, or pretending to be asleep. The young man had closed his eyes, perhaps for fear that they might, for all his efforts to the contrary, betray a weakening, a desire to yield. He sat there, his face fast shut to all approaches, a bony face that looked as though carved in granite, in which the only sign of sensitiveness was the vulnerable line of the eyelids.

Very gradually the doctor withdrew his hand.

* * * * *

Was it before that scene in the brougham, or later, that the woman sitting over there on the settee, separated from him by no more than a single table, so that he could have spoken to her without raising his voice, had come into his life? She seemed calmer now, and was sipping her drink with never a fear, it seemed, that Raymond might have recognized her. Every now

and again she looked at him, only to look away almost at once. Suddenly her voice—and how well he remembered it!—rose above the babble of noise: "There's Gladys!"

The newly-arrived couple came over at once and sat down between her and her companion. They all started talking at once. "We were waiting for our cloak-room tickets." "We're always the first to arrive—well, anyhow you've come, that's the main thing."

No, it must have been more than a year before the scene between father and son in the brougham, that, one day at dinner (it would have been in the late Spring, because the lamp in the dining-room had not been lit), Madame Courrèges the elder had said to her daughter-in-law: "I know whom the white hangings in the church were for, Lucie."

Raymond had thought that one of those endless conversations was about to begin, full of trivial phrases that dropped dead about the doctor's chair. As a rule, they had to do with household matters, each of the women present rushing to do battle for her own particular member of the staff, so that the encounter became a squalid Iliad in which the quarrels of the servants' hall set the various patron Goddesses at one another's throat in the Olympus of the dining-room. Often the two families would set about disputing the favours of the daily sewing-woman. For instance: "I've arranged with Travaillotte to come to me next week," Madame Courrèges would say to Madeleine Basque, and then the younger woman would at once protest that the children's underwear needed mending.

"You always nobble Travaillotte."

"Well, then, why don't you fix up with old broken-nose Mary?"

"Broken-nose Mary is a much slower worker. Besides, she always insists on my paying her tram fare."

But on this particular evening, the mention of the white hangings in church had given rise to a more serious discussion. Madame Courrèges the elder had more to say.

"They're for that poor little boy of Maria Cross's, the one who died of meningitis. I gather she ordered an extremely expensive funeral."

"How very tactless!"

At his wife's exclamation, the doctor, who sat reading a journal while he drank his soup, raised his eyes. She, as usual when that happened, lowered hers, angrily remarking that it was a pity, all the same, that the curé hadn't managed to instil some sense of guilt into a woman who, as everyone knew, was a kept creature, who flaunted her shame all over the place, with her horses and carriages and all the rest.

The doctor made a gesture with his hand indicative of protest.

"It's not for us to judge: she's done *us* no harm."

"What about the scandal? I suppose that doesn't count?"

From the face he pulled she could see that he was saying to himself how vulgar she was. She made an effort to moderate her tone, though a few seconds later she exclaimed as loudly as before that women like that gave her the horrors. . . . The house that for so long had been the home of her old friend, Madame Bouffard, Victor Larousselle's mother-in-law, was now occupied by a slut. . . . Every time she passed the door it cut her to the heart. . . .

The doctor, speaking very calmly, and in an almost hushed voice, interrupted the flow to point out that the only person in that house to-night was a mother sitting by her dead child. At this, Madame Courrèges, with one finger raised, announced solemnly:

"It is God's judgment!"

The children heard the scraping sound made by the doctor's chair as he pushed it sharply back from the table. He thrust his journals into his pocket, and, without another word, walked across to the door. He forced himself to move slowly, but the family, all attention now, could hear him running upstairs four steps at a time.

"Did I say anything so very extraordinary?" Madame Courrèges addressed a questioning look at her mother-in-law, at the young couple, at the children, at the servant. The only sounds in the room were the scraping of knives and forks and Madeleine's voice: "Don't nibble your bread—stop playing with that bone. . . ."

Madame Courrèges, her eyes fixed on her mother-in-law, said: "I really think he must be ill."

But the old lady, her nose buried in her plate, seemed not to have heard. It was at this point that Raymond had burst out laughing.

"If you must laugh you'd better go outside! And don't come back till you can control yourself!"

Raymond threw his napkin on the floor. How peaceful it was in the garden. Yes, it must have been late Spring because he remembered the bumbling noise made by the cockchafers, and that they had had strawberries for dinner. He had sat down in the middle of the paddock on the still warm stone rim of a fountain which no human eye had ever seen spouting water. He noticed his father's shadow passing and repassing the windows of the first floor. In the twilight that poured dusty and heavy over this stretch of country not far from Bordeaux, a bell was tolling at long intervals because death had come for the child of this same woman who now sat drinking so close to him that he could have stretched out his hand and touched her. Since starting on the champagne, Maria Cross had been gazing more boldly at the young man, as though she were no longer afraid that she might be recognized. To say that she had not aged was an understatement. In spite of the fact that she had cut her hair, and that she was wearing nothing that trespassed beyond the winter's fashion, her whole body had somehow kept the lines that had been in vogue about 19 . . . . She looked young, but it was as though her youth had come to flower fifteen years ago and remained unchanged. She was young in the way that no one is young to-day. Her eyelids looked no wearier than they had done

when she had said to Raymond: "Our eyes have a fellow feeling."

* * * * *

Raymond remembered how, on the day following the evening on which his father had suddenly left the table, he had sat very early in the dining-room drinking his chocolate. The windows were open on the dawn mist, and he shivered a little. There was a smell of freshly-ground coffee. The gravel of the drive crackled under the wheels of the ancient brougham. The doctor was late. Madame Courrèges, in a purple dressing-gown, her hair plaited and twisted in the way she always wore it when she went to bed, kissed him on the forehead. He went on with his breakfast without pausing.

"Isn't your father down yet?"

She said that she had got some letter to give him for the post. But he could guess the reason for her early appearance. When the members of a family live cheek by jowl, they get into the habit of never giving away their own secrets but of ever being on the alert to probe the secrets of others. The mother said of her daughter-in-law: "She never tells me anything, but there is precious little I don't know about her." Each person in the group claimed to know all about the others, while themselves remained inscrutable. Raymond thought he knew why his mother was there: "She wants to make it up." After a scene like that of the previous evenings, she would dog her husband's footsteps, seeking to be taken back into favour. The poor woman was always discovering too late that she had the fatal gift of habitually saying what would most get on the doctor's nerves. As in certain forms of nightmare, the more she tried to approach him, the further away she seemed to get. She could do nothing, say nothing, that was not hateful to him. Tangled in her clumsy efforts at tenderness, she was, as it were, always groping her way forward with outstretched hands. But whenever she touched him it was to bruise.

As soon as she heard the sound of his bedroom door closing,

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she poured out a cup of steaming coffee. A smile lit up her face, which was marked by the traces of a sleepless night and worn by the slow dripping of laborious and identical days. But the smile vanished as soon as the doctor appeared. She was already on her guard, trying to read the expression in his eyes.

"Why, you've got your top-hat and overcoat on!"

"That is quite obvious."

"Are you going to a wedding?"

. . . .

"A funeral, then?"

"Yes."

"Who has died?"

"Someone you don't know, Lucie."

"Tell me who it is."

"The little Cross boy."

"Maria Cross's son? Do you know her? You never told me you did. You never tell me anything. Considering that we were talking at dinner of that hussy . . ."

The doctor was drinking his coffee, standing. He answered in his quietest tones, which was always a sign with him that he was exasperated almost beyond bearing, though well under control:

"Haven't you learned, even after twenty-five years, that I prefer to discuss my patients as little as possible?"

No, she hadn't, and insisted that it always amazed her to find out, quite by chance, in the course of a social call, that this or that friend of hers had been attended by Dr. Courrèges.

"It's so awkward for me when people look surprised. 'What,' they say, 'do you really mean to tell me that you didn't *know*?' and then I have to admit that you don't trust me, that you never tell me anything. Were you treating the child? What did he die of? I can't see why you won't tell me. I never repeat things. Besides, with people like that, what can it matter? . . ."

For any sign the doctor gave, he might not have heard or seen her. He put on his overcoat, calling to Raymond: "Get a move on; seven o'clock struck ages ago."

Madame Courrèges pattered along behind them.

"What have I said now? You suddenly put all your prickles out. . . ."

The door slammed. A clump of shrubs hid the brougham from view. The sun began to shred the mist. Madame Courrèges, talking disjointedly to herself, turned back towards the house.

Seated in the carriage, the schoolboy looked at his father with eager curiosity, anxious for confidences. Now, if ever, father and son might have drawn closer together. But the doctor's thoughts were far from the boy with whom, so often, he had longed to come to grips. Here was the young prey ready to his hand, and he did not realize it. He sat there, muttering into his beard, as though he had been alone: "I ought to have called in a surgeon. One can always try trepanning as a last resort." He pushed back his top-hat with its nap all brushed the wrong way, lowered one of the windows and thrust out his hirsute countenance above the traffic-encumbered road. At the city limits he said absent-mindedly: "See you this evening," but he did not gaze after Raymond's retreating form.

III

IN the course of the following summer Raymond Courrèges had his seventeenth birthday. He remembered it as a season of torrid heat and shortage of water. Never since then had the city of stone lain prostrate under so intolerable a glare, cluttered though his memory was with many summers spent in Bordeaux, a city protected by hills from the north winds, and close invested by pines and sand which concentrate and accumulate the heat—Bordeaux, so poor in trees, except for its Public Gardens, where, to the eyes of children parched with thirst, it seemed as though the last vestiges of green in all the world were being burned to cinders behind the tall and solemn railings.

But perhaps, in retrospect, he was confusing the sun's heat of that especial summer with the inner flame that was burning him up, him and sixty others of his age, who had their being within the limits of a yard separated from other yards by the back walls of a row of latrines. It needed the constant presence of two ushers to control this herd of boys who were dying into life, of men on the verge of being born. Responsive to the thrust of painful growth, the forest of young lives put forth, in a few short months, spindly and ailing shoots. The world and its ways had the effect of pruning the rank growth of these young scions of good families, but in Raymond Courrèges the action of the rising sap was fierce and uninhibited. He was an object of fear and horror to his masters, who kept him with his scarred face (because his tender skin could not endure the razor) as far as possible from associating with his fellows. The good boys of the school looked on him as a "dirty beast" who carried photographs of women in his note-case and read *Aphrodite* (disguised as a prayer-book) in chapel. He had "lost his faith." This phrase caused as much terror in the school as would, in an asylum, the rumour that one of the most dangerous lunatics had broken out of his strait-jacket and was wandering stark-naked through the grounds. It was matter of general knowledge that on those rare Sundays when he was not being "kept in," Raymond Courrèges hid his school uniform and his cap, with the monogram of the Virgin, in a bed of nettles, put on an overcoat bought ready-made at Thierry and Sigrand, clapped on his head an absurd bowler which made him look like a plain-clothes policeman, and hung about the more disreputable booths at the fair. He has been seen on the merry-go-round hugging a slut of indeterminate age.

When, in the pompous setting of Prize-Day, an attendant multitude of parents sat stupefied by the heat in the shade of leaves already shrivelled by the sun, and heard the head master announce that Courrèges had "passed with distinction," he alone knew what an effort he had made, in spite of the apparent law-

lessness of his days, not to be ploughed. A single fixed idea had filled his mind to the exclusion even of the sense of persecution, so that the hours of detention, spent standing against the rough-cast wall of the playground, had actually seemed short—the idea of departure, of flight, in the first glow of a summer morning, along the high-road to Spain which ran past the Courrèges' garden, a road that looked as though it were weighed down by the bulk of its great flagstones, a relic of the Emperor, of his guns and of his convoys. He savoured in anticipation the heady delight of every step that should put a little more distance between him, the school and his depressing family. It was an understood thing that on the day he passed his examination his father and his grandmother would each give him a hundred francs. Since he had already got eight hundred saved up, he would thus be owner of the thousand which, so he thought, would enable him to travel through the world, miles and miles from his own "people." That was why he had spent the hours of detention working, untroubled by the sight of others at play. Sometimes he would shut his book and chew the cud of day-dreams. In imagination he could hear the scrape of cicadas in the pine trees along the roads which soon he would be travelling, could see the cool shade of the inn before which, tired out with travelling, he would sit in some unidentified village. The rising moon would wake the cocks, and off he would start again in the freshness of the dawn, with the taste of bread in his mouth. And sometimes he would sleep beneath a mill, a single corn-stook blotting out the stars: and the damp fingers of the early day would rouse him. . . .

But, though masters and parents had agreed in thinking him capable of anything, he had not, after all, taken to flight. His enemies, though they knew it not, had been too strong for him. Defeat comes to the young because they let themselves be so easily convinced of their own wretched inadequacy. At seventeen the most undisciplined of boys is only too ready to accept the image of himself imposed by others. Raymond Courrèges

was blessed with good looks, but thought himself a monster of ugliness and squalor. He was blind to the fine contours of his face, and convinced that he could rouse in others only feelings of disgust. He was filled with a horror of his own person, and felt assured that he could never pay back in kind the emotion of hostility which he caused in those about him. That was why, stronger even than the longing to escape, he felt the desire to hide, to veil his face, to be compelled no more to wipe away the hatred of future enemies yet unknown. This youthful debauchee, whose hand the pupils of the Church School were afraid to touch, was no less ignorant than they of women, and could not conceive that he might be capable of giving pleasure if only to a slattern in the gutter. He was ashamed of his body. It never occurred either to his parents or to his masters that all his glorying in wildness and dirt was but the miserable bravado of the young which he assumed because he wanted to make them believe that he revelled in his own uncomeliness. His attitude was no more than the threadbare pride of adolescence, a sort of despairing humility.

The holidays that followed his examination, so far from opening a way of escape, were a period of secret cowardice. Paralysed by timidity, he thought he could read contempt in the eyes of the servant-girl who did his room, and quailed before the brooding look which, at times, his father turned on him. Since the Basques were spending August at Arcachon, he had not even the consolation of the children with whose young bodies, supple as growing plants, he loved to play so roughly.

As soon as the young family had gone, Madame Courrèges heaved a sigh of relief.

"It's nice to have the place to ourselves for a bit," she said, in this way taking her revenge on a remark of her daughter's to the effect that "Gaston and I really need a little course of solitude."

Actually, the poor woman lived for nothing but the daily letter, and could not hear the muttering of a storm without

seeing in imagination the whole Basque family being dashed to destruction in an open boat. The house was only half-full, and the empty rooms weighed heavily on her spirits. Of what comfort to her was a son who spent his time running wild about the roads, and came back sullen-tempered and dripping with sweat, to dash at his food like a ravenous animal?

"People say, 'Well, you've got your husband.' My husband!—I ask you!"

"You forget, darling, how busy Paul is."

"He doesn't have any rounds to make, mother. Most of his patients are on holiday."

"Not his poorer patients. Besides, he's got his laboratory work, the hospital, and all those articles he has to write. . . ."

The embittered wife shook her head. She knew that her husband's active temperament would never lack employment, that never, till the day of his death, would there be a moment's pause in which, for a few brief instants, she might count on his whole and undivided attention. It never occurred to her that such a thing could be possible. She did not know that in even the fullest lives love can hollow out its little nest; that the harassed statesman will stop the wheels of the world when the moment comes for his mistress to pay him a visit. This ignorance spared her much suffering. Though she was only too familiar with the kind of love that dogs the feet of someone beyond the power to touch, someone who will not so much as turn his head to take a moment's notice, the mere fact that she had always been powerless to hold his attention for no matter how brief a while made it impossible for her to imagine that for some other woman the doctor might be a totally different person. She would have hated to think that somewhere a woman might exist who was capable of charming him from that incomprehensible world in which he lived, made up of statistics and observations, of blood and pus imprisoned between glass slides; and it was many years before she discovered that there were evenings when the laboratory remained deserted, when the sick had to wait in vain for

the man who, when he might have eased their pain, preferred to stand motionless in a dark and stuffy drawing-room, gazing down at a woman stretched upon a sofa.

In order to contrive such secret oases in his days of toil the doctor had to work with twice his normal intensity; had to hack his way through every kind of obstacle that he might win as his reward those few moments filled with concentrated watching and impassioned silence, when to look was all the satisfaction he desired. Sometimes, just when the long-expected hour had almost sounded, a message would reach him from Maria Cross saying that she was no longer free, that the man on whom she was dependent had arranged a party in some restaurant on the outskirts of the city. When that happened he would have found the thought of life intolerable had she not added a postscript to her note suggesting another day. Then, in a flash, the miracle occurred, and at once his whole existence centred about the thought of the new meeting promised by her words. Though every hour of every day was filled with duties, he included in a single sweeping act of vision, like a skilful chess-player, all the possible combinations that might enable him so to arrange matters that, when the time and date arrived, he could be there, motionless and disengaged, in the stuffy and encumbered room, gazing at the figure stretched upon its sofa. And when the moment came and went at which, had she not put him off, he might have been with her, he was filled with happiness, thinking: "It would have been over by now, but, as things are, I still have that happiness in front of me. . . ." There was something then with which he could fill the empty days that lay between. At such times the laboratory in particular took on the quality of a haven. Within its walls he lost all sense of the passing hours, even of love itself. Absorbed in research, he felt freed from time, filling with work the moments that must be lived till, suddenly, the longed-for hour would come when he could push open the gate of that small house where Maria Cross lived behind the church at Talence.

Devoured by his obsession, he gave, that summer, less and less attention to his son. He who had been made privy to so many shameful secrets often said to himself: 'We always think that the happenings tucked away in newspaper paragraphs don't concern us, that murders, suicides and scandals are what come to other people, while, all the time . . .' And yet, all the time, he did not know that there had been moments in the course of that devastating August when his son had been within an ace of taking an irreparable step. Raymond longed to run away, but longed, too, to hide, to become invisible. He could not pluck up courage to go into a café or a shop. He would walk up and down a dozen times before a door before he could bring himself to open it. This mania made all flight impossible, though he felt stifled in his home. Many were the evenings when death seemed to him to be the simplest of all solutions. He would open the drawer in which his father kept an old-fashioned revolver, but it was not God's will that he should find the cartridges. One afternoon he walked between the drooping vines down to the pond that lay beyond the sun-baked paddock. He hoped that the weeds, the growing water-plants, might knot a tangle round his feet, that he might be unable to extricate himself from the muddy liquid, that his eyes and mouth might be filled with slime, that no one might ever see him more, nor he see others watching him. Mosquitoes were skimming the surface, frogs were plopping in the eddying shadows like so many stones. Caught in the weeds a dead animal showed white. What saved Raymond then was not fear but disgust.

Fortunately, he was not often alone. The Courrèges' tennis-court was a focus of attraction for all the young people of the neighbourhood. It was one of Madame Courrèges' grievances that the Basques should have involved her in the expense of having it made, and then, when they might have played on it, had gone away. Only strangers got the benefit of it. Young men in white, with rackets in their hands, moving inaudibly on sandalled feet, appeared in the drawing-room at the hour of

siesta, greeted the ladies, barely bothered to ask after Raymond and went out again into the glare which echoed soon to their cries of "Play" and "Out," to the sound of their laughter. "They don't even trouble to shut the door," grumbled Grandmamma Courrèges, who thought of nothing but keeping out the heat. Raymond might have been willing to play, but the presence of the young women frightened him—especially of the Cosserouge girls, Marie-Thérèse, Marie-Louise and Marguerite-Marie, all three fat and fair and suffering from headache because of the weight of their hair, for they were condemned to wear upon their heads enormous structures of yellow tresses imperfectly secured with combs and always on the point of falling down. He hated them. Why must they always laugh so much? They were in a constant state of wriggling convulsions, convinced that everybody else was a "scream." They didn't, as it happened, laugh more at Raymond than at anybody else, but it was his particular curse to feel himself the centre of a universal derision. But there was one reason, in particular, why he hated them. The day before the Basques went away, he had found it impossible any longer to refuse to keep a promise he had made to his brother-in-law that he would ride a monstrous great horse that the lieutenant was leaving behind in the stables. He was at the age when no sooner was he in the saddle than he was seized with giddiness. Consequently, he cut a poor figure as a horseman. One morning the Cosserouge girls had come on him suddenly in a forest ride, clinging desperately to the pommel of his saddle. A moment later and he was sprawling on the sandy ground. He could never see them after that without hearing again the giggling screams in which, at that moment, they had indulged. Each time they met they took delight in reminding him of each circumstance of that humiliating fall. What storms does teasing, however harmless in intention, raise in a young man's heart in the springtime of life! Raymond was incapable of distinguishing one Cosserouge from another, but lumped them collectively within the orbit of his hatred, regarding them as a sort of fat,

three-headed monster, always sweating and clucking beneath the motionless trees of that August afternoon of 19...

Sometimes he took the tram, crossed the blazing inferno of Bordeaux, and reached the docks, where human bodies, devoured by poverty and scrofula, were splashing about in the stagnant water with its iridescent scum of oil. Their owners laughed, chasing one another, and leaving on the flags the faint, damp outline of their feet.

October returned. The passage perilous had been accomplished. Raymond had passed the dangerous crisis of his life. It was written that he should be saved, and, indeed, he was already saved when, at the beginning of term, the new school books (he had always loved the smell of them) brought to him a sort of concentrated vision, as he stood upon the threshold of the year which was to initiate him into the study of philosophy, of all the dreams and systems that have beguiled the human mind. Yes, he was to be saved, though not by his own unaided efforts. The time was near when a woman would come into his life—that same woman who, this evening, was watching him through the smoky haze and crowding couples of the tiny bar, whose wide and tranquil brow no passage of time had had the power to change.

During the winter months through which he had lived before they met, his spirit had lain in a profound torpor. A sort of dull passivity had left him weaponless. Stripped of his old aggressiveness, he was no longer the eternal whipping-boy of fate. Once the holidays had passed that had tormented him with the twin obsession of escape and death, he found himself acquiescing in the expected conduct of his days. Discipline came to his assistance by making life a good deal easier. But he savoured even more intensely his daily journey home, the evening passage from one suburb to another. The College gate once left behind, he plunged into the secret darkness of the damp little lane which was sometimes filled with the smell of fog, sometimes with the hard, dry breath of frost. With the sky, too, in its many aspects, he became

familiar—overcast, swept clear and corroded with stars, veiled with a covering of cloud that seemed to be lit from within by a moon he could not see. And then, in a short while, would come the city limits, with the same crowd of tired, dirty, submissive men and women waiting to lay siege to the tram. The great glowing rectangle plunged ahead into a land, half town, half country, carrying more lights than the *Titanic*, rumbling on between pathetic little gardens that lay submerged beneath the fathoms of the winter night.

At home he no longer felt himself to be the object of a never-ceasing curiosity. General attention was now concentrated upon the doctor.

"I'm worried about him," said Madame Courrèges to her mother-in-law. "You're lucky to be able to take things so calmly. I envy temperaments like yours."

"Paul is rather overworked. He does too much, there's no doubt about that. But he has a magnificent constitution, so I'm not really concerned."

The younger woman shrugged her shoulders, making no effort to hear what the other muttered half to herself: "He's not ill, I'm sure of that. All the same, he *is* suffering."

Madame Courrèges said, not for the first time, "Trust a doctor never to take care of himself."

During dinner she kept a watchful eye on him. How emaciated she thought his face looked when he raised his eyes from his place.

"It's Friday, why cutlets?"

"You need a good body-building diet."

"What do you know about it?"

"Why won't you go and see Duluc? No doctor can ever prescribe for himself."

"My poor Lucie, why have you made up your mind that I am ill?"

"You can't see yourself. Why, the mere look of you is enough

to frighten one. Everybody says the same thing. Only yesterday, someone—I forget who—said: 'What is the matter with your husband?' You ought to take choleine. I'm sure it's your liver."

"Why my liver rather than some other organ?"

Her reply was peremptory: "My impression is that it *must be* your liver."

Lucie's impression to that effect was very definite, and nothing would induce her to give it up. Her comments buzzed round the doctor like so many flies, only far more irritating: "You've already had two cups of coffee—I must tell cook to see that the pot isn't filled. That's your third cigarette since lunch. It's no good your denying it. There are three stubs in the ash-tray."

"What proves that he knows he's ill," she said one day to her mother-in-law, "is that I caught him yesterday looking at himself in the glass. As a rule, he never bothers about his appearance, but there he was, peering at his face and running his fingers over it. It was as though he wanted to smooth out the wrinkles on his forehead and round his eyes. He even opened his mouth and examined his teeth."

Madame Courrèges the elder looked at her daughter-in-law over the top of her spectacles, as though fearful of detecting upon that puzzled countenance something more than mere anxiety, something more in the nature of suspicion. The old lady had a feeling that her son's good-night kiss had recently been less perfunctory than usual. Perhaps she knew what that momentary surrender to emotion meant. Ever since he was a young man she had got into the way of guessing the precise nature of those wounds which one person alone, the owner of the hand that deals them, can cure. But the wife, though for many years frustrated in her instinct of tenderness, had thoughts only for physical ailments. Each time the doctor sat down opposite her, and raised his clasped hands to his face with its look of suffering, she said:

"You really *ought* to see Duluc: we *all* think so."

"Duluc could tell me nothing I don't already know."

"Can you listen to your own heart?"

To this question the doctor made no reply. His whole attention was concentrated upon the pain at his heart. It was as though a hand were holding, and just faintly squeezing, it. Ah! who better than he could count its beats, for were they not the evidence of what he had just been through with Maria Cross? How difficult it was to slip a more than usually tender word, a hinted declaration, into a conversation with a woman who showed herself always so submissive, who insisted on regarding her doctor as an almost godlike creature, and forced upon him the dignity of a spiritual fatherhood!

He went over in his mind the circumstances of his most recent visit. He had got out of the carriage on the main road, opposite the church at Talence, and had walked up the puddled lane. So swift had been the progress of the dusk that it was almost dark before he reached the gate. At the far end of an untidy path a lamp threw a ruddy glow from the ground-floor windows of a low-built house. He did not ring. No servant preceded him through the dining-room. He entered the drawing-room without knocking. Maria Cross was lying on a sofa and did not get up. Indeed, for a second or two she went on reading. Finally:

"So there you are, doctor; I'm quite ready for you," she said, holding out both hands, and moving her feet so as to make room for him on the end of the sofa. "Don't take that chair, it's broken. I live, you know, in a jumble of luxury and squalor. . . ."

Monsieur Larousselle had set her up in this suburban villa where the visitor was liable to trip over tears in the carpet, and only the folds of the curtains concealed the holes in the fabric. Sometimes when he went to see her she said nothing. He was prevented from starting a conversation fitted to his rôle of suppliant lover—a conversation which he had made up his mind *must* take place—by the presence, over the sofa, of a mirror which reflected the image of a face eaten away by a mass of beard, of two bloodshot eyes dimmed as the result of constant

application to a microscope, of a forehead from which the hair had already begun to recede when he was still a house-physician. Nevertheless, he was determined to try his luck. One of her small hands was trailing over the edge of the sofa, almost touching the floor. He took it, and said in a low voice: "Maria. . . ." Such was her confidence in him that she did not withdraw it. "I'm not feverish, doctor; really I'm not." As always, she spoke of herself. "Dear friend," she said: "I've done something of which you'll thoroughly approve. I've told Monsieur Larousselle that I no longer need the car, that he'd better sell it and get rid of Firmin. You know how it is with him, how incapable he is of understanding any delicacy of feeling. He just laughed, and said what was the point of upsetting everything merely because of a moment's whim? But I mean it, and I never use anything but the tram now, whatever the weather. I came back in it to-day from the cemetery. I thought you'd be pleased. I feel less unworthy of our poor dead darling . . . less . . . less like a kept woman."

The last two words were barely audible. The eyes which she raised to the doctor's face were brimming with tears, and seemed humbly to implore his approval. He gave it her at once, gravely, coldly. She was for ever invoking him. "You're so *big* . . . you're the noblest human being I have ever known . . . the mere fact that you exist makes me believe in the reality of goodness." How he longed to protest, to say: "I'm not the man you think me, Maria; only a poor, a very poor creature, eaten up by desire just like other men. . . ."

"You wouldn't be such a saint," she replied, when he tried to put these thoughts into words, "if you didn't despise yourself."

"No, no, Maria: not a saint at all: you don't, you can't know . . ."

She gazed at him with a fixed stare of admiration, but it never occurred to her to worry about him, as Lucie worried, to notice how ill he looked. The concentrated worship which was her tribute to him made of his love a despair. His desire was walled

up within this admiration. He told himself in his misery, when he was far from her, that his love could surmount all obstacles; but as soon as she was there before him, deferential, hanging on his words, he could no longer deny the evidence of a wretchedness that was beyond all cure. Nothing in the world could change the nature of their relation. She was not his mistress but his disciple. He was not her lover but her spiritual director. To have stretched his arms towards her supine body, to have pressed it to his own, would have been as mad an act as to break the mirror hanging above her head. He knew, too, with horrible clarity, that she was waiting for him to go. The realization that she was an object of interest to the doctor was, for her, a matter of pride. Surrounded by the wreckage of her life, she prized very highly the intimacy of so eminent a man. But how he bored her! He, without having the slightest idea that his visits were a burden to her, did increasingly feel that his secret was becoming more and more obvious, so obvious, indeed, that only her complete indifference could explain her inability to guess it. Had Maria felt even a vestige of affection for him, his love must have stared her in the face. Alas! how utterly insensitive a woman can be when confronted by a man whom, otherwise, she may esteem and even venerate, whose friendship fills her with pride, but who bores her! Of this truth the doctor had some faint realization only, but it was enough to crush him.

He got up, cutting her short in the middle of something she was saying.

"I must say, you *are* a bit abrupt in your manner of taking leave," she remarked; "but there are so many other sufferers waiting for you. . . . I mustn't be selfish and keep you all to myself."

Once again he crossed the empty dining-room and the hall. Once again he breathed in the smell of the frost-bound garden, and in the carriage on his way home, thinking of Lucie's attentive, worried face—no doubt she was already getting anxious,

and would be straining her ears for the sound of his return—said to himself: 'The great thing is not to *cause* suffering. It's quite enough that *I* suffer: I mustn't create suffering in others.'

"You're looking much worse this evening. Why *will* you put off seeing Duluc? If you won't do it for your own sake, you might at least do it for ours. You're not the only person concerned: it affects all of us."

Madame Courrèges called the Basques to witness the truth of her pronouncement. They emerged from the low-voiced conversation which they were carrying on, and obediently backed her up.

"It's quite true, Papa, we all want to have you with us as long as possible."

At the mere sound of the hated voice the doctor felt ashamed of the strength of his dislike for his son-in-law. 'He's really quite a decent fellow . . . it's unforgivable on my part . . .' But how was he to forget the reasons he had for hating him? For long years one thing only in his marriage had seemed to be precisely as he had always dreamed it would be—the narrow cot standing beside the vast conjugal bed, and he and his wife, each evening watching the slumber of Madeleine, their first-born. Her breathing was scarcely perceptible. One innocent foot had kicked off the coverlet. A small hand, soft and marvellous, hung down between the bars. She was such a sweet-natured child that they could afford to spoil her without fear of consequences, and such advantage did she take of her father's infatuation that she would play for hours in his study without making a sound. "You say she's not very intelligent," he would say; "she's much *more* than intelligent." Later, though he hated going out with Madame Courrèges, he loved to be seen in the company of the young girl. "People think you're my wife!" It was about then that he had made up his mind that the right man for her would be Fred Robinson, the only one, he felt, of all his pupils who really understood him. He already called him "my son," and

was just waiting until Madeleine should have turned eighteen to conclude the marriage, when, at the end of the first winter after she had "come out," she told him that she was engaged to Lieutenant Basque. The doctor's furious opposition had lasted for months. No one could see any sense in it, neither his family nor the world at large. Why should he prefer a penniless young student, who came from heaven knew where, to a well-off officer of good ancestry with a brilliant future before him?

His reasons were too personal to himself to make it possible for him to discuss them. From the first moment that he had started to raise objections he felt that in the eyes of this dearly loved daughter he had become an enemy. He told himself that his death would have been a matter to her of rejoicing, that she looked on him now merely as an old wall that must be battered down so that she could join the male who was calling to her. Because he wanted to see precisely where he stood, because he wanted to be sure to what extent this child, on whom he had lavished all his affection, hated him, he had intensified his stubbornness. Even his old mother was against him and joined forces with the young people. Plots were hatched under his own roof to enable the lovers to meet without his knowledge. When, finally, he had given in, his daughter had kissed him on the cheek. He had pushed away her hair, as he used to do, so as to touch her forehead with his lips. Everyone said: "Madeleine adores her father. She has always been his favourite." Until the day of his death, no doubt, he would hear her calling him "Darling Papa." Meanwhile he must put up with this Basque fellow. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not help betraying the fact of his antipathy. "It really is extraordinary," said Madame Courrèges. "Here he is with a son-in-law who shares his views about everything, and yet he doesn't like him!" It was just this that the doctor could not forgive, this seeing all his most cherished ideas turning to caricature in the distorting mirror of the young man's mind. The lieutenant was one of those persons whose approval flattens us out, and makes us

doubt the very truths for which, previously, we would have shed our blood.

"Really, Papa, I mean it. You must take care of yourself for your children's sake. You must allow them to take sides with you against yourself."

The doctor left the room without answering. Later, when the Basques had sought the refuge of their bedroom (so sacred was it held to be that Madame Courrèges was wont to say, "I never set foot in it: Madeleine has made it perfectly plain that she doesn't want me there. There are some things that don't have to be said twice: I can take a hint"), they undressed in silence. The lieutenant, on his knees, his head buried in the bed, turned round suddenly and put a question to his wife:

"Was this house part of your parents' marriage settlement? . . . What I mean is, did they buy it after they were married?"

Madeleine thought so, but was not certain. "It would be interesting to know, because in that case, should anything happen to your poor father, we should have a legal right to one-half of it."

He said no more for a few moments, and then, after a pause, asked how old Raymond was, and seemed annoyed to learn that he was only seventeen.

"What difference does that make? Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. . . ."

He may have been thinking that a minor always complicates an inheritance, because, getting to his feet, he said:

"Naturally, I hope that your poor father will be with us for a long time yet. . . ."

In the darkness of the room the huge bed yawned to receive them. They went to it, just as twice a day, at noon and at eight o'clock, they sat down to table—when they were hungry.

About this same time Raymond woke in the night. Something that had a flat taste was trickling over his face and down his throat. His hand felt for the matches. He lit one, and, by its

light, saw that blood was spurting from his left nostril and staining his nightshirt and the sheets. He got up and stood, petrified with fear, in front of the looking-glass, staring at his long thin body all speckled with scarlet. He wiped his fingers that were sticky with blood, on his chest, and thought how funny his smeared face looked. He began to play a game in which he was both murderer and murdered.

IV

THE evening was just like any other evening at the end of January, when, in those latitudes, winter is already on the wane. Raymond, seated in his workmen's tram, was jarred by the sight of the woman opposite. Far from being distressed at the thought that he formed but one anonymous unit of this human freight, he enjoyed pretending that he was an emigrant in the steerage while the ship drove ahead through the darkness. The trees were coral reefs, the people and the traffic on the road outside, denizens of the vasty deep. The journey, which, while it lasted, kept from him all sense of humiliation, was all too short. Not one of all the bodies round him but was as much neglected as his own, as badly dressed. When, as occasionally happened, his eyes met other eyes, he saw in the answering look no hint of mockery. All the same, his linen was cleaner than the unbuttoned shirt, say, of the man with as much hair on his chest as a wild animal. He felt at ease among these people. It never occurred to him that one spoken word would have been enough to conjure up the desert that separates classes as surely from one another as it does individuals. But such communion as might be possible was, no doubt, achieved by this contact, this shared immersion of a tram-car driving through the suburban night. Rough though he was at school, here he made no effort to shake himself free of the head that was bumping up and down on his

shoulder, the head of an exhausted urchin of his own age whose body sagged in sleep, as loosely articulated as a bunch of flowers too lightly bound.

But on this particular evening he noticed, opposite, a woman, a lady. She was dressed in black, and was wedged between two men in greasy overalls. There was no veil over her face. He was to wonder, later, how it was that beneath her gaze he had not, at first, been conscious of that shy awkwardness which the humblest servant-girl could usually produce in him. He was troubled by no feeling of shame, no embarrassment—perhaps because in this tram-car he felt himself to be without identity, and could imagine no circumstances which might establish a relation between himself and this particular stranger. But the chief reason was that her expression was entirely devoid of anything that might have been taken for curiosity, mockery or contempt. But, Lord, how she stared! It was as though, absorbed in that concentration, she were saying to herself: 'The sight of this face brings consolation for all the tedium to which one is exposed in a public vehicle. Confronted by what might well be a sullen angel, I can forget the whole miserable scene. Nothing now has any longer the power to rasp my nerves. Merely to look brings me deliverance. He is like some unknown country. The lids of his eyes are a barren stretch of sea-sand. Two troubled lakes lie drowsing between their bordering lashes. The ink on his fingers, his grimy collar and cuffs, that missing button—all these things are no more than the earth that dirties a ripe fruit ready to fall from the tree, and only waiting the touch of a careful hand to gather it.'

He, too, feeling so safe because he had nothing to fear from this stranger, not even a word, since nothing had built a bridge between them, stared back with that tranquil intensity with which we gaze upon a distant planet. . . . (What innocence still clung about her brow. Courrèges, this evening, cast a furtive look at it. The radiance which bathed it owed nothing to the glare of the tiny bar, all to that intelligence which is so rarely

found in a woman's face, though, when it is, how deeply it moves us, how convincingly persuades that Thought, Idea, Intelligence are words of the feminine gender!)

In front of the church at Talence the young woman got up, leaving with the men she was deserting only the fragrance of her presence, and even that had vanished by the time Raymond reached the end of his journey. It was scarcely cold at all on this January evening. He was not even tempted to run. Already there was a promise in the foggy air of the secret sweetness of the coming season. The earth was stripped but not asleep.

Raymond, intent on his own thoughts, noticed nothing that evening as he sat at table with his family, though his father had never looked so ill. Madame Courrèges made no reference to the fact. He mustn't be "pestered," as she said to the Basques as soon as he had gone upstairs with his mother. All the same, she had made up her mind to talk to Duluc without his knowledge. The room reeked of the Lieutenant's cigar. Leaning against the mantelpiece, Gaston said: "There's no doubt about it, mother: something's the matter with him." There was a military quality of command about the jerky brevity of his speech, and when Madeleine, taking an opposite line to her mother, remarked: "It may be only some temporary upset . . ." he interrupted her.

"No, Madeleine, it's serious. Your mother is quite right."

The young woman had the temerity to argue. He raised his voice:

"I say that your mother is right, and that should be enough for you!"

Up on the first floor Madame Courrèges the elder knocked gently at her son's door. She found him seated with a number of books open before him. She asked no questions, but sat knitting, saying nothing. If her silence, her reticence became more than he could bear, if he felt the sudden need to speak, she was ready to listen. But a sure instinct kept her from forcing his

confidence. For a moment he was tempted to choke back no longer the cry which was stifling him. But to speak now would mean going so terribly far back in thought, would mean telling over one by one the beads of his misery up to the moment of to-night's discomfiture. . . . How could he explain the disproportion between his suffering and its cause? What had happened would seem so trivial. It was merely that when he had called on Maria Cross at the time they had arranged, the servant told him that she had not come in. The news had inflicted the first stab of pain. He had agreed to wait in the empty drawing-room where a clock was ticking—though less quickly than his heart. A lamp shone on the pretentious beams of the ceiling. On a low table beside the sofa he noticed an ash-tray filled with cigarette ends. 'She smokes too much . . . she's poisoning herself.' What a lot of books there were, but in none were the last pages cut. His eye took in the torn folds of the great curtains of faded silk. To himself he repeated: "Luxury and squalor, squalor and luxury" . . . looked at the clock, then at his watch, and decided that he would wait only another fifteen minutes. How quickly, then, did time begin to fly. That it might not seem too short, he refused to let his thoughts dwell on his laboratory, on his interrupted experiment. He got up, went over to the sofa, knelt down, and, after first glancing nervously towards the door, buried his face in the cushions. . . . When he got up his left knee made its usual cracking sound. He planted himself in front of the mirror, touched with his finger the swollen artery upon his temple, and thought to himself that if anyone had come in and seen him, they would have thought him mad. With the characteristic aridity of the intellectual worker who reduces everything to the terms of a formula, he said, "All men are mad when they are alone. Yes, self-control is active only when it is backed by the control imposed upon us by the presence of others." Alas! that one little piece of reasoning had sufficed to exhaust the fifteen minutes' grace he had allowed himself. . . .

How could he explain to his mother sitting there, eager for

confidences, the misery of that moment, the degree of renunciation it had demanded, the fact that it had had the effect of tearing him up by the roots from the melancholy satisfaction of his daily conversation with Maria Cross? What matters is not the willingness to confide even when we have a sympathetic listener, even when that listener is a mother. Which of us is skilled enough to compress a whole inner world into a few words? How is it possible to detach from the moving flow of consciousness one particular sensation rather than another? One can tell nothing unless one tells all. How could he expect this old lady to understand the music that sounded so deep down in her son's heart, with its lacerating discords? He was of another race than hers, being of another sex. They were separated more surely than people living on two different planets. . . . There, in his mother's presence, the doctor remembered his misery but did not put it into words. He remembered how, tired of waiting, he had just picked up his hat, when he heard the sound of steps in the hall. It was as though his whole life hung suspended. The door opened, but, instead of the woman he expected he saw Victor Larousselle.

"You know, doctor, you're spoiling Maria."

Not a hint of suspicion in the voice. The doctor smiled at sight of the impeccable figure with its full-blooded face and light-coloured suit, bursting with self-satisfaction and contentment.

"What a windfall for you doctors these neurasthenics are, these *malades imaginaires*. No, no, I'm only joking. Everyone knows what a selfless fellow you are. . . . Still, it's a bit of dam' good luck for Maria that she should have happened on so rare a bird of the species as you. D'you know why she isn't back? Just because she's given up the car—that's her latest fancy. Between ourselves, I really think she's a bit touched—but that's only an added charm in a pretty woman, eh? What do you think, doctor? Must say I'm very glad to see you. Look here, stay to dinner: Maria'll be delighted: she adores you. You won't? Well,

at least wait until she gets back. You're the only person I can talk to about her."

"You're the only person I can talk to about her." . . . That sudden outburst of tormented words from this fat, resplendent man! 'This passion of his,' said the doctor to himself, as he drove home, 'is the scandal of the place. All the same, it is the one noble sentiment of which the fool is capable. At fifty he has suddenly discovered that he is vulnerable; that he can suffer because of a woman whose body he has almost certainly conquered. But that is not enough for him. Somewhere, outside his world of business and horses, there will henceforward be a finer principle of suffering. . . . The romantic conception of passion is not, perhaps, as silly as we think it.' Maria Cross! Maria! What misery not to have seen her! 'But even worse than that is the knowledge that she didn't even think of sending me word. How small a place I must occupy in her life! She can break an appointment without so much as a thought . . . I cram infinity into a few short minutes that for her mean nothing. . . .'

The sound of spoken words roused him from his reverie. His mother could bear the silence no longer. She, too, had been following the drift of her secret preoccupations, and was no longer dwelling upon her son's load of mysterious sorrow. She was back once more with what so constantly obsessed her—her relation with her daughter-in-law.

"I let her trample on me; I never say anything but 'Have your own way, my dear, do just as you want.' Nobody could say I provoke her, but she's forever throwing her money in my teeth; money! as though you didn't make enough! I know, of course, that when you married you had nothing but your future to offer her, and that she was a Voulassier of Elbeuf—though their mills in those days weren't anything like what they have become since. All the same, she could have made a better match, I realize that. . . . 'When one's got something, one always wants more'—as she said to me one day about Madeleine. But let's not complain. If it wasn't for the servants, everything would be all right."

"There are few worse things in life, my poor, dear mother, than having servants of different masters all living together in the same kitchen."

He touched her forehead with his lips, left the door ajar so that she could see her way, and repeated mechanically, "There are few worse things in life."

The next day Maria's whim about the car must still have been in the ascendant, because, coming home in the tram, Raymond saw the unknown woman seated in her usual place. Once more her tranquil gaze took possession of the childish face opposite, making the circuit of the eyelids, tracing the line where the dark hair met the forehead, pausing at the glint of teeth between the lips. He remembered that he had not shaved for two days, touched his skinny jaw, and then, in an access of shyness, hid his hands beneath his cape. She lowered her eyes, and he did not at first notice that, since he wore no suspenders, one of his socks had slipped down, revealing a patch of bare leg. Too nervous to pull it up, he changed his position. He was not, however, conscious of mental discomfort. What he had always hated in other people was their laughter, their smiles—even when suppressed. He could catch the faintest sign of a trembling at the corners of a mouth, knew only too well what it meant when somebody started to bite their lower lip. But the expression on this woman's face as she looked at him was something he had never met before, something at once intelligent yet animal. Yes, it was the face of some marvellous, impassive *beast*, incapable of laughter. He did not know that his father often teased Maria Cross about the way she had of adjusting laughter to her face like a mask, and then letting it fall again without the slightest hint of alteration in the imperturbable melancholy of her gaze.

When she had got out of the tram by the church at Talence, and there was nothing left for him to see except the faint dent in the leather of the seat which she had occupied, he felt absolutely

certain that they would meet again next day. He could give no good reason for his hope, but just had faith in the event. That evening, as soon as dinner was over, he carried two jugs of boiling water to his room, and took down his hip-bath from where it hung on the wall. Next morning he got up a good half-hour earlier than usual, because he had made up his mind that henceforth he would shave every day.

The Courrèges might have spent hours watching the slow unfolding of a chestnut bud without even beginning to understand the mystery of the rising sap. Similarly, they were blissfully unaware of the miracle that was happening in their midst. As the first strokes of a spade may bring to light the fragments of a perfect statue, so the first glance from Maria Cross had revealed a new being in the grubby schoolboy. Beneath the warmth of her contemplative gaze a body, lovely, though ill cared for, had on a sudden stirred, as, in the rough bark of some forest tree, a spellbound goddess. The Courrèges had no eyes for the wonder, because the members of a family too closely united lose the power to see one another properly. In the course of a few weeks Raymond had become a young man careful of his appearance, converted to the use of soap and water, secure in the knowledge that he could be pleasing to others, eager to attract. But to his mother he was still an unwashed schoolboy. A woman, without uttering a single word, merely by the intensity of her watching eyes, had transformed their child, moulding him afresh, though they were incapable of detecting so much as a trace of this strange magic.

In the tram-car, which was no longer lit now that the days were lengthening, Raymond, at each encounter, ventured on some new gesture. He crossed his legs, displayed his clean and uncreased socks, his shoes shining like mirrors (there was a shoe-shine boy at the Croix de Saint-Genès). He had no longer any reason to conceal his cuffs. He wore gloves. There came a day when he took one of them off, and the young woman could not suppress a smile at sight of the over-pink nails on which a

manicurist had been working hard, though, because for years he had been in the habit of biting them, it would have been better had they not as yet been allowed to draw attention to themselves. All this was but the outward sign of an inner, an invisible, resurrection. The fog that for so long had been collecting in the boy's most secret heart was thinning by degrees under the influence of that serious and still wordless gaze to which custom had already given a certain intimacy. Maybe he wasn't a monster after all; perhaps, like other young men, he could hold the attention of a woman—and, perhaps, more than her attention! In spite of their silence, the mere passage of time was weaving between them a web of contacts which no word or gesture could have strengthened. They felt that the moment was coming when, for the first time, they would speak, but Raymond did nothing to hasten its approach. Shy galley-slave that he was, he found it enough that he no longer felt his chains. For the moment, all the happiness he needed lay in this feeling of his that he had become someone entirely different. Was it really true that until this unknown woman had begun to look at him he had been nothing but a dirty little brat? We are, all of us, moulded and re-moulded by those who have loved us, and though that love may pass, we remain none the less *their* work—a work that very likely they do not recognize, and which is never exactly what they intended. No love, no friendship can ever cross the path of our destiny without leaving some mark upon it for ever. The Raymond Courrèges who sat this evening in a small bar in the Rue Duphot, the man of thirty-five, would have been someone quite different if, in 19— when he was just embarking on his philosophy course, he had not seen, sitting opposite him in a tram on his way home from school, Maria Cross.

V

IT was his father who first noticed the new man in Raymond. One Sunday, towards the end of that same spring, he was seated at the family table, more deeply buried in his own thoughts even than usual, so far buried, in fact, that he scarcely heard the noise which had started as the result of a dispute between his son and his son-in-law. The subject of the argument was bull-fighting, a sport of which Raymond was a passionate devotee. He had come away that afternoon after seeing four bulls killed, so as not to miss the six o'clock tram. But the sacrifice had gone unrewarded, because the unknown woman was not in her seat. He might have guessed as much, it being Sunday. And now she had made him miss two bulls. Thus was he busy with his thoughts while Lieutenant Basque was holding forth.

"I can't understand how your father comes to let you watch such an exhibition of slaughter."

Raymond's reply, "That's a bit comic, I must say: an army officer who can't stand the sight of blood!" started a real row.

The doctor suddenly became aware of what was going on.

"And what, may I ask, do you mean by that?"

"That you're just yellow."

"Yellow?—say that again!"

They were both on their feet. Every member of the family was now taking sides. Madeleine Basque, cried to her husband:

"Don't answer him! He's not worth it! What does it matter what *he* says!"

The doctor begged Raymond to sit down.

"Get on with your meal, and let us have no more of this!"

The lieutenant shouted that he had been called a coward. Madame Courrèges maintained that Raymond had meant nothing of the sort. Meanwhile, they had all resumed their seats. As the result of a sort of secret connivance they one and

all set about throwing water on the flames. Family feeling made them view with extreme repugnance anything that might upset the smooth running of their little circle. They were a crew embarked for life in the same ship, and an instinct of self-preservation made them careful to see to it that no one should start a fire. That was why silence now descended on the room. A light rain had been falling, but the sound of drops on the steps outside suddenly stopped, and the newly released fragrance of the garden drifted in to where they all sat saying nothing. Someone remarked hastily that it was already cooler, and another voice replied that the rain hadn't amounted to anything, and would barely lay the dust. The doctor, with a feeling of bewilderment, looked at the tall young man who was his son. He had hardly thought of him at all for some time, and now scarcely recognized him. He himself had just emerged from a long nightmare. He had been caught up in it ever since the day, now long past, when Maria Cross had failed to keep her appointment, and had left him closeted with Victor Larousselle. The Sunday now drawing to a close had been one of the most horrible days of his whole life, but at last it had given him back his freedom (or so he thought!). Salvation had come to him as the result of an overwhelming fatigue, an indescribable lassitude. His sufferings had been too much for him. All he wanted now was to turn his back on the battle, to go to ground in old age. Almost two months had elapsed between the ordeal of his profitless vigil in the "luxury and squalor" of Maria Cross's drawing-room, and this hideous afternoon which had witnessed his ultimate surrender. Seated at the now silent table, he once again forgot his son, letting his memory recall each separate circumstance of the hard road that he had travelled. In imagination he could see once more its every milestone.

The intolerable agony had started on the very morning after the broken appointment. Her letter of apology had struck the first note.

"It was to some extent *your* fault, my dear, good friend"—Maria had written in the missive which he had read and re-read over and over again, in the course of those two months:

". . . because it was the thought of you that gave me the idea of turning my back on a hateful luxury which had begun to make me feel ashamed. Not having the car any longer, I couldn't get back by our usual time. Being without it meant that I reach the cemetery later, and that I stay there longer, because my conscience is clear. You've no idea how quiet it is there at the end of the afternoon, full of birds perched on the grave-stones and singing. I felt that my baby-boy approved of what I had done, that he was satisfied with me. I feel already rewarded for my action by having been allowed to sit with all those working-people in the tram. You'll think I'm becoming too romantic, but indeed it is not so. It makes me feel happy to be there with all those poor folk of whom I am so little worthy. I can't find words in which to tell you what that coming home in the tram means to me. 'A certain person' is ready to go down on his bended knees, so anxious is he that I should take back the car which 'a certain person' gave me. But I won't. Dear, dear doctor, what does it really matter if we *don't* see one another? Your example, your teaching, is enough for me. We are so closely united that mere physical presence has no importance. As Maurice Maeterlinck has so wonderfully written—'A time will come, nor is it far off, when human souls will be aware of one another without the intervention of any physical organ.' Write to me. Your letters are all I need, dear spiritual director!

M. C.

"Ought I to go on taking the pills and the injections? I've only got three doses left. Must I buy another box?"

Even had it not so cruelly wounded him, this letter would have aroused the doctor's displeasure, so eloquent was it of self-

satisfaction and the pleasure that comes of sham humility. There was no secret of the human heart to which he had not been made privy, and, as a result, his tolerance, where his fellow-men were concerned, was almost unlimited. One vice, and one vice only, irritated him beyond bearing: the effort of the morally depraved to put a mask of beauty on their depravity. For him the last infirmity of the human creature lay in the ability to be dazzled by its own filth as by a diamond. Not that this sort of lie in the soul was habitual with Maria Cross. In fact, what had first charmed the doctor had been a power in her to see herself as she was, a refusal to embellish what was naturally ugly. One of her favourite themes had always been the noble example which her mother, a poor schoolmistress in a small country town, widowed while still young, had given her.

"She worked like a slave to pay my school-fees, and had quite made up her mind that I should go to a training college. She had the great happiness, before she died, of being present at my marriage, a happiness for which she had never dared to hope. Your son-in-law was well acquainted with my husband, who was a medical officer in his regiment. He adored me, and I was very happy with him. Left, as I was, with a child, I had scarcely enough to live on when he died, but I could have managed somehow. It wasn't sheer necessity that was my undoing, but something that is really much more hateful—the desire to cut a figure, the longing for the security that marriage gives.... What, now, keeps me from leaving 'him' is the fact that I am too cowardly to take up the struggle again, to work my fingers to the bone for an inadequate salary."

Often, since the time of those first confidences, the doctor had heard her deprecate herself, mercilessly pass sentence on her weaknesses. Why then had she suddenly fallen a victim to the detestable vice of self-praise? But what most hurt him in her letter was something quite different. His grievance against her came from the fact that he had lied to himself, that he dared not probe a far deeper wound, the only wound of which he could

not endure the pain. Maria showed no desire to see him, could quite gaily envisage the possibility of their separation. Time and time again, while he was listening to some patient endlessly elaborating the details of his ailments, or to some floundering candidate humming and hawing over the definition of hæmoptysis, he heard an inner voice repeating that phrase of Maeterlinck's about human souls being aware of one another without the intervention of any physical organ. He must have been mad ever to have believed for a single moment that a young woman could feel the need for his bodily presence. Mad, quite mad: but then, what resource of reasoning can save us from the unendurable pain of knowing that the adored creature whose "being there" is a necessary condition of our continued existence, even of our physical existence, can resign herself with complete indifference (perhaps, actually, with a certain sensation of relief) to the prospect of never seeing us again? At such times we realize that we mean nothing to the one person who means everything to us.

During all this period the doctor made an effort to get the better of himself. "I caught him again the other day looking at himself in the glass," said Madame Courrèges: "that means he's beginning to get worried." What sight better calculated to bring tranquillity and the apathy of complete despair than that of his own face, with all the telltale marks left upon it by fifty years of exhausting work? There was only one thing for him to do—to think of Maria only as he might have thought of someone dead and buried; to await the coming of death, and hasten it by doubling his daily dose of work—yes, to drive himself without mercy, to kill himself with work, to achieve deliverance through the opium of forced labour. But he who showed so little mercy to those of his fellow-men who lived a lie, was still the dupe of his own thoughts: 'She needs me: I must give her what I would give any sick person.' He answered her letter with one of his own, in which he said that he felt it necessary to continue his

treatment. She was perfectly right, he told her, to travel by tram, but was it necessary for her to go out every day? He begged her to let him know when he should find her at home. He would so arrange matters as to be free to come at the usual hour.

A whole week passed without a further word from her. Each morning he had only to glance at the pile of prospectuses and newspapers to see that she had not written. He gave himself up to a calculation of probabilities. 'I posted my letter on Saturday. There is only one delivery on Sundays. She can't have got it till Monday. Assuming that she has waited two or three days before replying, it would be very extraordinary if I heard from her to-day. If nothing happens to-morrow it will be time enough for me to start worrying.'

And then, one evening, when he came in from a particularly hard day, he found a letter.

"I regard my daily visit to the cemetery as a sacred duty. I have quite decided to make my little pilgrimage no matter what the weather. It is just when evening is falling that I seem closest to my lost angel. I have a feeling that he knows when I shall come, that he lies there waiting for me. I know it is ridiculous, but the heart has its reasons, as Pascal says. I am happy and at peace when I get into the six o'clock tram. Have you any idea what a workers' tram is like? But I feel no fear. I am not so very far removed from 'the people,' and though there may be an apparent gulf between us, am I not linked with them in another way? I look at all those men, and it seems to me that they are just as lonely as I am—how shall I put it?—no less uprooted, no less socially at sea. My house is more luxurious than their houses; still, it is nothing but a series of ready-furnished rooms. Nothing in it belongs to me any more than what is in theirs belongs to them. That is true even of our bodies. Why not call one day, very late, on your way home? I know that you don't like meeting Monsieur Larousselle. I'll tell him that I want to see you alone. All you

need do when our interview is over is just exchange a few polite words with him. . . . You forgot to say anything about the pills and the injections. . . ."

The doctor's first instinct had been to tear the letter up and scatter the fragments. Then he went down on his knees, gathered them all together, and scrambled to his feet again with considerable difficulty. Didn't she realize that he couldn't bear even the proximity of Larousselle? Everything about the man was hateful to him. He belonged to just the same general type as Basque. The lips that showed beneath the dyed moustache, the heavy dewlaps, the stocky figure, all proclaimed a complacency that nothing could shake. The fat thighs below the covert-coat were expressive of an infinite self-satisfaction. Because he deceived Maria Cross with the lowest of the low, it was said in Bordeaux that he "just kept her for show." Scarcely anybody but the doctor knew that she was still the one great passion of his life, the secret weakness which drove him almost beside himself. The man might be a fool, but the fact remained that he had bought her, that he alone possessed her. Now that he was a widower, he would probably have married her had it not been for the existence of his son, the sole heir to the Larousselle fortune, who was being prepared for his august destiny by an army of nurses, tutors and priests. It was unthinkable that the boy should be exposed to contact with such a woman, unthinkable that he should inherit a name degraded by a *mésalliance*.

"There's no getting away from it," Basque was fond of saying —for he was deeply attached to all that made for the greatness of his native place—"there's no getting away from it, Larousselle's out of the top drawer all right, he's a gentleman through and through, and what more can one ask?"

Maria knew that the doctor loathed him. How, then, could she dare to make an appointment for the one time of the day when he would be sure to be brought face to face with the object of his execration? He went so far as to persuade himself that she

had deliberately planned the meeting so as to get rid of him. After spending several weeks writing and tearing up a number of mad, furious letters, he finally sent her one that was both short and dry, in which he said that since she could arrange to be at home on only one afternoon, it must be because she was perfectly well and had no need of his ministrations. By return of post came four pages of excuse and protestation. She would, she said, be at home to him at whatever hour he might like to come on the next day but one, which happened to be a Sunday.

"Monsieur Larousselle is going to a bull-fight. He knows that I don't like that sort of thing. Come for tea. I shall wait for you until half-past five."

Never had the doctor received from her a letter in which the sublimities played so small a part, in which matters of health and treatment were not even mentioned. He re-read it more than once, and frequently touched it as it lay in his pocket. This meeting, he felt, would be different from all that had preceded it. At last he would be able to declare his passion. But, man of science that he was, and taught by repeated experiences that his presentiments had a way of never being realized, he kept on saying to himself: 'No, it's *not* a presentiment . . . my attitude of expectancy is wholly logical. I wrote her a churlish letter to which she has sent a friendly answer. Therefore, it is up to me to see to it that our first words shall give to our talk a tone of frankness and intimacy. . . .'

As he drove from his laboratory to the hospital, he rehearsed the coming interview; again and again asked *her* questions, again and again framed the replies he would have her make. He was one of those imaginative persons who never read novels because for them no work of fiction can ever be nearly so enthralling as the one they invent for themselves, the one in which they play the leading rôle. No sooner had he signed a prescription and found himself on the way downstairs from his patient's room, than he was back, once more, like a dog digging up a buried

bone, with his fond imagined reveries. Sometimes he felt ashamed of yielding to them, but they served his ordinarily timid nature as a means of bending things and people to the all-powerful will he would have liked to possess. Scrupulous though he was in daily life, he knew no inhibitions of any kind in these adventures of the mind. He would gladly have countenanced the most appalling massacres, would, even in imagination, have blotted out every member of his family, if by so doing he could have created for himself a new and different existence.

During the two days that elapsed before his meeting with Maria Cross he did not, it is true, have to suppress any fancies of this blood-curdling kind, but that was because in the particular episode which he had invented for his pleasure it was unnecessary to wipe out anybody. All he had to do was to break with his wife, as he had seen many of his colleagues do with theirs, and for no better reason than that he found the thought of living any longer with her unutterably boring. At fifty-two a man may still hope for a few more years of happiness, even though they may be poisoned by feelings of remorse. But why should one who has never known happiness resist a chance of tasting even its make-believe? His continued presence no longer served to bring contentment to an embittered partner, and, as to his son and daughter, well, he had long ago given up all hopes of waking any feelings of affection in *them*. Ever since Madeleine had got herself engaged he had known only too well what the love of his children amounted to. . . . And Raymond? Surely when a person is so inaccessible there is no reason why one should sacrifice oneself in vain efforts to make contact?

He realized well enough that the imagined delights in which he was now indulging were altogether different from his habitual day-dreams. Even when, at a single imagined blow, he blotted out, in fancy, a whole family, he could still feel faintly ashamed, though not at all remorseful. What he was really conscious of on those occasions was a faint sense that he was making himself

ridiculous. Such fantasies were purely superficial and did not involve the depths of his being. No, it had never occurred to him that he might be looked upon as a monster, or that he was in any way different from other men who, in his view, were all of them mad as soon as they were alone with their thoughts and freed from the control of others.

But, during the whole of the forty-eight hours which had got to be lived through until the appointed Sunday arrived, he knew he was clinging with all the strength that was in him to a dream that was rapidly becoming a hope. So obsessed was he by the anticipated interview with this woman that he could think of nothing but the words he had decided must pass between them. He occupied himself with putting the finishing touches to a scenario, the central situation of which could be summed up in the following piece of dialogue:

"We are both of us, Maria, at a dead end. There is only one alternative before us. Either we must die with our backs to the wall, or we must retrace our steps and—live. I know you can't love me, because you have never loved anybody. There is nothing for you to do but put yourself wholly into the hands of the one man capable of demanding nothing in exchange for his own devotion."

At this point he could hear in imagination the sort of protest she would make:

"You must be mad! What about your wife, your children?"

"They don't need me. When a man is buried alive he has the right, if he has the strength, to lift the stone that is choking him. You can have no idea of the desert that lies between me and my wife, between me and my son and daughter. The words I speak to them scarcely reach their ears. Animals, when their young have become full-grown, drive them out. More often than not the males do not even recognize them as their own. It is only human beings who invent sentiments which survive the activities of function. Christ knew this well when He said that those who followed Him must leave father and mother for His sake, who

gloried in the knowledge that He had been sent to separate husband from wife, and children from those who had brought them into the world."

"You can't compare yourself to God."

"Am I not God's image in your eyes? Is it not to me that you owe your taste for a certain kind of perfection?" (But here the doctor would break off: 'Better keep metaphysics out of it.')

"But what about your position, your patients, the career of beneficent activity which you have built up? Think of the scandal. . . ."

"If I were to die they would have to do without me. No one is indispensable. And when I say die, I mean die, Maria. For I shall set the equivalent of death between me and the wretched hermit existence, so full of grinding labour, which I have been leading. With you I shall be reborn. What money belongs to my wife she shall keep. I can make enough for our needs. I have been offered a professorship in Algiers, another in Santiago. . . . I will hand over to my children what I have managed to save up to date."

The imagined scene had reached this point when the carriage stopped at the hospital. With his thoughts still far away, the doctor passed through the door. His eyes were the eyes of a man who is just emerging from some mysterious enchantment. As soon as his rounds were finished he returned to his day-dreaming, driven on by a secret hunger, saying to himself: 'I am quite mad . . . all the same. . . .' Among his colleagues there were men, he realized, who had made dreams like that come true. To be sure, their undisciplined lives had done something to prepare public opinion for the scandal of their break with the proprieties, whereas it was the opinion of the whole town that Doctor Courrèges was a saint. But what of that? It was just because he had got this reputation without wanting it that it would be such a relief to shed the tiresome load. Once free of it, he would no longer have to spend his time urging Maria Cross to act nobly, or in giving her edifying lectures. He would

be a man with a woman to love. He would be a man strong enough to take by force everything he wanted.

At last Sunday dawned. On that one day of the seven it was the doctor's custom to attend only his most important cases. He was careful not to go near the consulting-room which he kept in town. It was always swarming with patients, but he used it only three days a week. He hated the ground-floor room in a building entirely given over to offices. He couldn't, he said, have written or read a line in it. As, at Lourdes, the most trivial little thank-offerings find a place, so, between those four walls, he had accumulated the various gifts showered upon him by grateful "cases." He had begun by hating the "artistic" bronzes, the Austrian terra-cottas, the composition cupids, the objects in porcelain, and the combined barometers and calendars. But gradually he had developed a kind of taste for the whole horrible museum, so that he was filled with joy each time that some more than usually hideous piece of "art" found its way into his hands. "Mind, nothing *old*," his patients would say to one another when discussing how best they could please Doctor Courrèges.

But on the particular Sunday which was to enshrine his meeting with Maria Cross, the meeting that was to change the whole course of his life, he had agreed to see, at three o'clock in this same consulting-room, a business man suffering from neurasthenia who could not manage to visit the doctor on any other day of the week. He had resigned himself to the necessity. At least it would provide him with an excuse for going out immediately after luncheon, and would occupy the few last moments before that fatal meeting so eagerly awaited, so deeply dreaded. He did not use the carriage, nor did he attempt to get into any of the overcrowded trams. Groups of human beings were festooned about their platforms, for there was to be a big Rugby match, and it was also the day of the first bull-fight of the season. The names of *Albagene* and *Fuentes* stared from great red-and-yellow bills. Though the spectacle was not due to begin

until four o'clock, the gloomy Sunday streets, with their shuttered shop-fronts, were already filled with crowds making their way towards the arena. The young men wore boaters with coloured bands, or hats of light grey felt which they fondly imagined had a Spanish look. They laughed in a thick cloud of cheap tobacco smoke. The cafés breathed into the street the clean smell of absinthe. He could not remember how long it was since he had last wandered aimlessly through the hurly-burly of the city with no other preoccupation than to kill time until a certain hour should strike. To be thus unemployed was a very strange experience for a man who was usually so overworked. He had lost the secret of doing nothing. He tried to think of the experiment he had recently begun, but could see nothing with his inner eye but Maria Cross lying on a sofa with a book.

Suddenly the sun stopped shining, and the walking folk turned apprehensive eyes to where a heavy cloud was creeping across the sky. Someone said that he had felt a drop of rain, but after a few moments the sun once more came out. No, the storm would not break until the last bull had been put out of its agony.

Perhaps, reflected the doctor, things would not turn out precisely as he had imagined they would. But one thing was certain, mathematically certain: he would not leave Maria Cross without making her privy to his secret. This time he would put his question. . . . Half-past two: another hour to kill before he was due at his consulting-room. At the bottom of his pocket he could feel the key of his laboratory. No, if he went back there it would mean leaving again almost as soon as he had arrived. The crowd swayed as though in the grip of a blustering wind. A voice cried: "There they are!" In a procession of ancient victorias, driven by coachmen who had caught something of reflected glory for all their shabbiness, sat the glittering matadors with their *quadrillas*. It surprised the doctor that he could discern no baseness in the emaciated faces of this strange priesthood clad in red and gold, in violet and silver. Once again a cloud blotted out the sun, and they turned their thin profiles to the tarnished

azure of the sky. He thrust a way through the crowd. He was walking now along narrow and deserted thoroughfares. His consulting-room, when he reached it, was as cool as a cellar. Women in terra-cotta and alabaster smiled down on him from columns of malachite. The ticking of a sham antique timepiece was slower than that of an imitation Delft clock which stood in the middle of the table, where a "modern-style" female, seated on a block of crystal, did duty as a paper-weight. All these various figures seemed to be singing in unison the title of a revue which had stared down on him from every corner or every street—*N'y a que çà de bon!*—including the bull in bogus bronze, his muzzle resting on the back of a companion cow. With a quick glance he took in the whole motley collection. Very quietly he said: "The human race could sink no lower!" He pushed open a shutter and set a dusty sunbeam dancing. Then he began to walk up and down the room, rubbing his hands. 'There must be no beating about the bush,' he assured himself. 'With my very first words I must make her realize how terribly I suffered when I made up my mind that she no longer wanted to see me. She will express surprise. I shall tell her with all the earnestness I can command that it is impossible for me any longer to live without her . . . and then, perhaps . . . perhaps . . .'

He heard the sound of the bell, went to the door and admitted his visitor. No interruption to this day-dreaming would come from *him*. All *he* asked was to be allowed to talk and talk. Neurasthenics of that sort seem to demand nothing of their doctors beyond a patient hearing. This one must have endowed the members of the profession with a kind of priestly aura, so eloquent was he in pathological confession, so anxious to display the most secret wounds of his soul. The doctor was once more, in imagination, with Maria Cross. 'I am a man, Maria, a poor creature of flesh and blood like other men. No one can live without happiness. I have discovered that truth rather late in life, but not too late—say it is not too late—for you to throw in your lot with mine. . . .' By this time his patient had stopped talking,

and the doctor, with that air of noble dignity which had earned him such universal admiration, said:

"The essential thing is that you should believe in the power of your own will. If you refuse to regard yourself as a free agent, I can do nothing for you. Even the art of healing can be wrecked on the reef of a wrong mental attitude. If you persist in thinking of yourself as the helpless victim of heredity, how can you hope that I shall be able to do anything for you? Before going further I demand from you an act of faith. You must believe that it is in your power to control all those wild beasts in yourself that are not the real you at all."

The other kept on eagerly interrupting him, and all the time he was speaking, the doctor, who had risen and gone over to the window, pretended to be looking into the empty street through the half-closed shutters. It was with something amounting to horror that he noted in himself the survival of all these lying phrases which expressed nothing but a faith long dead. Just as we perceive the light given off by a star which has been cold for centuries, so those around him heard the echo of beliefs which he had ceased to hold. He came back to the table, saw that the sham Delft clock marked four o'clock, and hastily got rid of his patient.

'I've got plenty of time,' he told himself as he all but ran along the pavement. When he reached the Place de la Comédie he saw that the trams were being besieged by the crowds of people who were pouring out of the cinemas. Not a cab was to be seen. He had to take his place in a queue, and kept consulting his watch. Accustomed as he was to driving everywhere, he had left himself too little time. He tried to calm his nervousness. Even putting things at their worst he would be no more than half an hour late—no unusual thing for a doctor. Maria always waited for him. Yes, but in her letter she had said "until half-past five," and it was already five! "Just you stop pushing!" exclaimed a fat and angry woman, the feather of whose hat was tickling his nose. Inside the tram, which was packed to suffocation, he regretted

that he was wearing an overcoat. He was sweating, and hated the thought of arriving with a dirty face and a strong smell.

Six o'clock had not yet struck when he got out in front of the church at Talence. At first he walked quickly, then, mad with anxiety, broke into a trot, though his heart was troubling him. A great storm-cloud had darkened the sky. In this ominous light the last bull must even now be bleeding. Between the railings of the little gardens branches of dusty lilac thrust out little begging hands, craving for rain. Under the warm slow drops he ran towards the woman whom he could see already, in imagination, stretched on her sofa. She would not immediately, on his entry, raise her eyes from her open book. . . . And then, just as he reached her front door, he saw her coming out. They both stopped. She was out of breath. Like him she had been running.

There was a hint of annoyance in her voice as she said:

"I *did* say half-past-five in my letter."

He took in her appearance with an observant eye.

"You're not in mourning."

She glanced down at her summer frock and replied:

"Doesn't mauve count as half-mourning?"

How different, already, everything was from what he had been imagining! Oppressed by a great weight of cowardice, he said:

"Since you had given me up, and probably have an appointment somewhere else, we had better put off our meeting to another day."

She spoke eagerly, quickly:

"With whom *should* I have an appointment? What an odd creature you are, doctor!"

She turned back towards the house, and he followed her. She let her skirt of mauve taffeta drag in the dust. When she bent her head he could see the back of her neck. She was thinking that if she had chosen Sunday for the doctor's call it was because she felt sure that the unknown boy would not be in the six o'clock tram. All the same, beside herself with joy and hope when he

did not come at the hour named, she had run down the road, just on the off-chance, saying to herself:

'There is just one possibility in a thousand that he has taken his usual tram because of me. Whatever happens, I must not let such a chance of happiness slip.' But, alas! she would never know now whether the stranger had been struck with gloom when he saw that she was not in her usual seat. The heavy rain was splashing on the front steps as she hurried up them, and she could hear behind her the old man's laboured breathing. How importunate are those who do not touch our hearts, those whom we have not chosen! They are wholly external to ourselves. There is nothing about them that we want to know. Should they die, their death would mean no more to us than their lives . . . yet it is they who fill our whole existence.

They went through the dining-room. She opened the drawing-room shutters and took off her hat. Then she lay down and smiled up at the doctor, who was trying desperately to pick some shreds and tatters from the words he had so carefully prepared. She said to him: "You are out of breath. I made you walk too fast."

"I am not as old as all that."

He raised his eyes, as he always did, to the mirror that hung above the sofa. What! was he even now not familiar with his own appearance? Why was it that, on each occasion, he felt that stab at the heart, that sense of numb misery, as though he had expected to see his own youth smiling back at him? But already he was putting the usual question: "And how are we to-day?" in that tone of paternal concern, with that half-serious inflexion, which he always adopted when he spoke to Maria Cross. Never had she felt so well, and in telling the doctor so she felt a pleasure which to some extent compensated her for the earlier disappointment. No, to-day, Sunday, the unknown boy would almost certainly not have been in the tram. But to-morrow, yes, to-morrow he would be there: of that there could be no doubt, and already her whole being was turned towards the joy to

come, the hope that, every day, was doomed to disappointment and rebirth, the hope that something fresh might occur, that the moment would come when he would speak to her.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't leave off the injections." (He saw reflected in the glass his skimpy beard and barren brow, and remembered the burning words he had prepared.)

"I'm sleeping well: I don't feel bored any longer—just think of that, doctor! And yet, somehow, I have no wish to read. I couldn't finish *Voyage de Sparte*; you'd better take it away with you."

"You still see nobody?"

"You don't really think that I should suddenly let myself get mixed up with all these men's mistresses, do you? I, who till now have always avoided them like the plague? In the whole of Bordeaux there is no one of my kind, as you must realize, nobody of whom I could make a friend."

Yes, she had said so often enough, but always, in the past, on a note of self-pity, never, as now, with peace and happiness in her voice. It was borne in on the doctor that her long and tapering flame would no longer point heavenward a flickering tongue, would no longer burn in a void, that somewhere, close to the earth, it had found, unknown to him, fuel on which to feed. He could not keep himself from saying with aggressive emphasis that though it might be true that she did not frequent the women, she nevertheless occasionally saw the men. He felt himself blushing as he realized that the conversation might, even now, take the very tone he had so ardently desired. Indeed, Maria did actually say with a smile:

"Don't tell me you are jealous, doctor! I really do believe you're going to make a scene! No, no, don't be frightened, I was only joking," she added immediately. "I know you too well."

It was obvious that she had been within an ace of laughing outright, that it had never even occurred to her that the doctor might really be capable of such weakness. A worried look came into her eyes.

"I haven't said anything to hurt you, have I?"

"Yes, you have."

But she failed entirely to understand the nature of the hurt he spoke of. She said that her feeling for him was one of veneration and respect. Hadn't he lowered himself to her level? Hadn't he sometimes deigned to raise her to his? With a movement as insincere as her words had been, she seized his hand and drew it to her lips. He snatched it away. Annoyed by the action, she got up, went over to the window, and stared out at the drenched garden. He, too, had risen. Without turning her head, she spoke:

"Wait till the shower's over."

He made no move, but stood there in the dark room. In all things a man of method, he employed the agonizing moments in rooting from his heart all desire and all hope. Everything was over, really over. From now on, nothing that had to do with this woman would ever more concern him. He had withdrawn from the battle. With his hand he made in the empty air the gesture of a man sweeping some obstacle aside.

Maria turned her head:

"It has stopped raining," she said.

Seeing that he still did not move, she hastened to add that it wasn't that she wanted to get rid of him, but wouldn't it be as well to take advantage of this momentary break? She offered him an umbrella which at first he accepted, only, a moment later, to refuse, because he had caught himself thinking, 'I shall have to bring it back: that'll give me a chance to see her again.'

He felt no pain, but only a sense of enjoyment in the tail end of the storm. His thoughts ran on himself, or rather on one part of himself. He was like a man who finds consolation for the death of a friend in the certainty that he has ceased to suffer. He had played and lost. No use crying over spilled milk. Henceforward nothing would matter to him but his work. Yesterday they had rung him up from the laboratory to say that the dog

had not survived the removal of its pancreas. Would Robinson manage to find another at the Lost Dogs' Home? The trams swept by, crammed with an exhausted, singing crowd. But he had no objection to walking along these suburban roads filled with lilac and smelling of the real country because of the rain and the effect of the failing light. He was done with suffering, with beating, like a prisoner, against the walls of his cell. The vital force which had been his since childhood, but which the pressure of so many human creatures had led him to dissipate, he now took back, thrusting it deep, deep into himself. Complete renunciation. In spite of staring posters and gleaming tram-lines, in spite of cyclists bent double over handlebars adorned with bunches of faded lilac, the suburb merged gradually into open country, the bars gave place to inns full of mule-drivers preparing to set off by moonlight. Onwards through the darkness they would trundle, like so many corpses stretched out in the bottom of their waggons, their faces to the stars. On the doorsteps of houses children were playing with drowsy cockchafers. Never again would he kick against the pricks. For how long now had he been exhausting all his energies in this dreary battle? He saw himself by the light of memory sobbing (it must be almost half a century ago) beside his mother's bed on the last day of the holidays. "Aren't you ashamed of crying, you lazy little silly-billy?" she had exclaimed, not knowing that what had provoked the outburst had simply been despair at the thought of leaving her: and later . . . once more he made that sweeping gesture with his hand, as though he were clearing a space before him. 'Now, what have I got to do tomorrow morning?' he thought, inoculating himself, as with an injection of morphine, with the thought of daily duties . . . of the dead dog, of the need to start the whole business over again from the beginning. Surely he had tabulated a sufficient number of observations already to enable him to confirm his hypothesis? What a lot of time he had wasted. Through what thickets of shame he had been wandering! Convinced that the whole human race must be

hanging on his every movement as he worked away in his laboratory, he had yet been willing to see day after day go by spoiled and empty. Science must be served with an undivided passion. It brooks no rival. 'I shall never be more than an amateur scientist.' He thought he saw fire burning in the branches and realized that it was the rising moon. He caught sight of the trees that hid from view the house which harboured that group of beings whom he had the right to call "my people." So often already he had been false to his vow, only later to renew it in his heart: 'From this very evening I will make Lucie happy.' He hastened his pace, impatient to prove that this time he would not weaken in his resolve. He thought of their first meeting, twenty-five years before, in a garden at Arcachon—a meeting engineered by one of his colleagues. But what he saw with his inward eye was not the betrothed of that distant time, not a pale and faded photograph, but a young woman in half-mourning, wild with joy because he was late, and hurrying to a meeting with someone else . . . but with whom? He felt a sharp stab of pain, stopped dead for a moment, and then broke into a run so as to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the man whom Maria Cross loved. The action brought comfort, ignorant though he was that each step he took was bringing him closer, though he did not realize it, to the unknown rival. . . . And yet it was on this very evening that, scarcely across the threshold of the room where Raymond and his brother-in-law stood at odds, he became conscious of a sudden burgeoning, a sudden rising of the spring sap, in the stranger whom he had brought into the world.

Those present had risen from the table, the children offering their foreheads for their elders absent-mindedly to kiss. This done, they went off to their rooms under an escort provided by their mother, their grandmother and their still more ancient ancestress. Raymond moved across to the French window. The doctor was struck by the way in which he took a cigarette from

his case, tapped it and lighted it. There was a rose-bud in his buttonhole, an orthodox crease in his trousers. The doctor thought: 'How extraordinarily like my poor father he is!' Indeed, he was the living image of the surgeon who, until he was seventy, had frittered away on women the fortune he had amassed by the practice of his art. He had been the first to introduce into Bordeaux the blessings of antiseptic treatment. He had never paid the slightest attention to his son, to whom he habitually referred as "the young 'un," as though he had forgotten his name. One night a woman had brought him home. His mouth was twisted and dribbling. His watch, his notecase and the diamond ring which he wore on his little finger were all missing. 'From him I have inherited a heart capable of passion, but not his gift of pleasing—that is a legacy reserved for his grandson.'

He looked at Raymond, who was staring into the garden—at this grown man who was his son. After the day of feverish emotions just past he would have dearly loved to confide his troubles to a friendly ear, or, rather, to indulge in a burst of maudlin self-pity, to say to his child: "Why do we never have a good talk? Is it that you think I should not understand you? Is the gulf that separates father and son so unbridgeable? I have the same heart to-day as I had when I was twenty, and you are the flesh of my flesh. There is at least a good chance that we have in common the same set of tastes, antipathies and temptations. . . . Which of us shall be the first to break this silence that divides us?" A man and a woman, no matter how completely estranged they may be, can at least come together in the ardour of an embrace. Even a mother may take between her hands the head of her grown-up son and kiss his hair. But a father can do no more than the doctor did when he laid his hand on Raymond's shoulder. The boy trembled and turned his head. His father averted his eyes and asked:

"Is it still raining?"

Raymond, upright upon the threshold, stretched his hand into the darkness.

"No, it's left off."

Then, without looking round, he added: "Good night," and the sound of his footsteps died away.

About the same time, Madame Courrèges was feeling completely "bowled over" because her husband had just suggested that she should take a turn with him in the garden. She said she would go in and fetch a wrap. He heard her go upstairs and then come down again with unwonted speed.

"Take my arm, Lucie: there's a cloud in front of the moon, and it's difficult to see one's way."

"But the path shows white."

She leaned rather heavily on him, and he noticed that her body still smelled the same as it had done in the old days of their engagement, when they sat together on a bench in the long June evenings. The mingled scent of human flesh and summer dusk was, as it were, the very essence of their betrothal.

He asked whether she, too, had not noticed the great change that had taken place in their son. No, she said, he was still as surly, as sullen, as pig-headed as he had always been. The doctor pressed his point. Raymond, according to him, was now far less undisciplined. He seemed to have more control over himself. It showed, if in nothing else, at least in the care he was giving to his personal appearance.

"That reminds me. Julie was complaining only yesterday that he wants her to press his trousers twice a week."

"Julie must be made to see reason. Don't forget that she has known him ever since he was a baby."

"Julie is devoted to us, but there are limits even to devotion. It's all very well for Madeleine to talk: *her* maids do nothing at all. I know that Julie is difficult, but I do understand why she should feel annoyed at having to sweep the back stairs as well as the front."

A skinflint nightingale uttered three short notes. Husband and

wife caught the hawthorn's scent of bitter almonds as they sauntered on. In a low voice, the doctor continued:

"Our little Raymond . . ."

"We shan't find it easy to replace Julie, and the sooner we realize that, the better. I know you'll say that she drives every cook we have out of the house, but more often than not she is in the right. . . . For instance, Léonie . . ."

With weary resignation he asked:

"Which of them was Léonie?"

"Surely you remember?—the fat one, not the last, but the woman who only stayed with us for three months. She objected to doing the dining-room. But it isn't part of Julie's work."

He said: "Servants to-day are very different from what they used to be."

It was as though some tide in him were suddenly ebbing, and drawing back as it receded all desire in him to confide, to confess, to abandon pretence, to let his tears flow.

"We had better go in."

"Madeleine is for ever saying that the cook is stubborn, but that's not Julie's fault. The woman wants us to raise her wages. They don't make as much out here as they do in town, though things are cheaper. If it wasn't for that they wouldn't stay at all."

"I'm going in."

"Already?"

She had a feeling that she had disappointed him, that she ought to have waited, to have let him do the talking.

"We don't often get a change to talk," she murmured.

From somewhere beyond the wretched fabric of words that she had built up, from somewhere beyond the wall that her vulgarity had erected, with ant-like patience, day by day, Lucie Courrèges could hear the stifled cry of a man who was buried alive, the shout of an imprisoned miner, and deep within herself, too, another voice replied to his, a sudden tenderness fluttered.

She made as though to lean her head upon her husband's shoulder, but guessed how his body would stiffen, his face take

on an expression of hard remoteness. Raising her eyes towards the house, she could not resist saying:

"You've left the light on in your room!"

She regretted the words as soon as she had uttered them. He hurried on so as to be free of her, ran up the steps, and sighed with relief at finding the drawing-room empty, because it meant that he could reach his study without meeting anybody. Safe there at last, he sat down at his table, kneaded his care-worn face with both hands, and once more made that motion of sweeping something aside. . . . The dog's death was a nuisance. It wasn't easy to find animals for his experiments. With all the ridiculous nonsense that had been bothering him of late, he had lost something of his grip on things. 'I've been relying too much on Robinson . . . he must have miscalculated the time of that last injection.' The only solution would be to begin again. From now on Robinson must confine his activities to taking the animals' temperature, to collecting and analysing their urine. . . .

VI

A FAILURE of the current had brought the trams to a standstill. They stood all along the boulevards, looking like a procession of yellow caterpillars. It had needed this incident to establish, at long last, some sort of direct contact between Raymond Courrèges and Maria Cross; not but what, on the day following the Sunday when they had not seen one another, a terrified feeling that they might never meet again had laid hold on both, with the result that each had separately decided to take the first step. But to her he was a shy schoolboy whom the slightest thing might frighten; and how, he felt, should he ever summon up enough courage to speak to a woman? Although for the first time she was wearing a light-coloured dress,

he sensed rather than saw her presence in the crowd, while she, for all her short-sightedness, recognized him from afar. There had been some sort of ceremony, and he was dressed in his school uniform, with the cape unfastened and hanging loose about his shoulders (in imitation of the cadets of the Naval Medical School). A few intending passengers got into the tram and settled down to wait until it started. Others wandered away in groups. Raymond and Maria found themselves side by side at the far end, close to the platform. Without looking at him, so that he might not think she was speaking for his benefit, she said in a low voice:

"After all, I haven't very far to go. . . ."

And he, with head averted and cheeks all flame:

"It might be rather nice to walk home for once."

It was then that she brought herself to look him full in the face. Never before had she been so close to him.

"We've been travelling back together for so long that we mustn't lose the habit."

They walked a short distance in silence. Furtively she looked at his hot and scarlet face, at the tender skin of youth scraped and sore from the razor. With a boyish gesture he was hugging to his body with both arms a well-worn portfolio crammed with books, and the idea that he was little more than a child became firmly fixed in her mind. This realization produced in her a sense of uneasy shyness in which scruple, shame and pure delight played an equal part. He, for his part, felt no less paralysed with nervousness than when, in earlier days, he had decided that only the exercise of superhuman will-power could induce him to enter a shop. Recognition of the fact that he was the taller of the two came as a staggering surprise. The lilac straw hat that she was wearing hid most of her face, but he could see her bare neck and one shoulder which had slipped free of her dress. The thought that he might not be able to find a word with which to break the silence, that he might ruin this precious moment, filled him with panic.

"You don't live very far away: I was forgetting."

"Not very far. The church at Talence is only about ten minutes' ride from the boulevards."

He took from his pocket an ink-stained handkerchief, mopped his forehead, noticed the ink, and put the handkerchief away again.

"But perhaps you've got further to go?"

"Oh no I haven't: I get out just after passing the church——"

Then, very hurriedly, he added: "I'm young Courrèges."

"The doctor's son?"

There was an eager note in his voice as he asked:

"He's pretty well known, isn't he?"

She had raised her face, the better to see him, and he noticed that the colour had gone from her cheeks. But even as the fact was borne in on him, she said:

"It really is a very small world. But you mustn't talk to him about me."

"I never talk to him about anything. Anyhow, I don't know who you are."

"That's just as well."

Once more she fixed on him a long and brooding look. The doctor's son! In that case, he must surely be just a very innocent and very pious schoolboy who would turn from her in horror as soon as he heard her name. It was impossible that he should not know about her. Young Bertrand Larousselle had been at school with him until last year. The name of Maria Cross must be a by-word among the boys. Less from curiosity than sheer nervousness he pressed her to disclose it.

"You really *must* tell me your name. After all, I've told you mine."

The level light touched to flame a basket of oranges standing in the doorway of a shop. The gardens looked as though they had been daubed all over with dust. At this point a bridge crossed that very same railway-line which once had been to Raymond an object of thrilling excitement because trains ran along it to

Spain. Maria Cross was thinking: 'If I tell him who I am, I may lose him. . . . But isn't it my duty to scare him away?' This inner debate was rich for her with pain and pleasure. She was quite genuinely suffering, but at the same time felt a vague satisfaction in murmuring to herself: "What a tragedy!"

"When you know who I am . . ." (she could not help thinking of the myth of Psyche, of *Lohengrin*).

His laugh was rather too boisterous. When he spoke, it was without restraint:

"Sooner or later we should have been bound to strike up an acquaintance in the tram. You must have realized that I made a point of always taking the one that leaves at six. . . . You didn't? Oh, I say, come off it! I often get to the terminus early enough to catch the one before that leaves at a quarter to, but I always give it a miss, just so as to see you. Yesterday I actually came away from the fight after the fourth bull in order not to miss our meeting, and then you weren't there! They tell me that Fuentes was on the top of his form in the last kill. But now we've broken the ice why should I care *what* your name is? There was a time when I didn't care about anything, but from the moment I realized you were trying to catch my eye . . ."

Had anyone else been speaking, Maria would have found such language atrociously vulgar, but in his mouth it had a delicious freshness, so that, later, each time she passed this particular spot on her journeys to and fro, she was to be reminded vividly of the sudden access of tenderness and joy that had been released in her by his schoolboy chatter.

"You can't get out of telling me your name. After all, I've only got to ask Papa. That'd be easy—the lady who always gets out of the tram by the church at Talence."

"I'll tell it you, but only on condition you swear never to talk about me to the doctor."

She no longer believed that the mention of her name would frighten him off, though she pretended to herself that the threat was real. 'Fate must decide,' she thought—because, deep down,

she was quite certain that she held the winning cards. Just before they reached the church she asked him to continue his journey alone—"because of the neighbours" who would recognize her and start gossiping.

"All right, but not until I know . . ."

Very hurriedly, and without looking at him, she said:

"Maria Cross."

"Maria Cross?"

She dug the point of her umbrella into the ground and added, precipitately:

"Wait until you know me . . ."

He was staring, as though dazzled by the sight of her:

"Maria Cross!"

So this was the woman whose name he had heard whispered one summer's day in the Allées de Tourny, when he and his companions were going back to school after the break. She had just passed them in a two-horse brougham. One of the other boys with whom he was walking had said: "Really, women like that! . . ." And suddenly another memory came back into his mind. There had been a time when he was taking a course of medicated baths, which meant that he had to leave school at four o'clock. On this particular occasion he had overtaken young Bertrand Larousselle. He was striding along, his long legs encased in gaiters of undressed leather. Already, in spite of his tender years, he was a bullying and overbearing youth. The younger boy was, as a rule, accompanied by either a servant or a black-gloved priest with his coat-collar turned up. Among the "juniors" Raymond enjoyed the worst reputation of all the "uppers," and, whenever the two of them met, the pure and pious Bertrand would devour the notorious "dirty beast" with his eyes. It never even occurred to him that to this same dirty beast he was himself an object of mystery. At this time Madame Victor Larousselle was still alive, and many ridiculous rumours about her were rife in town and school. Maria Cross, it was said, had set her heart on marriage, and was demanding that her

lover should turn his family out of doors. Others announced as a fact that she was waiting until Madame Larousselle should have died of cancer, so that she could then be married in church. More than once Raymond had caught sight of Bertrand behind the closed windows of a car, driving with his corpse-like mother. The women of the Courrèges and Basquefa milies, speaking of her, used to say: "Poor thing! With what dignity she bears her martyrdom! If ever anybody had their purgatory here on earth, it's she! . . . If *my* husband behaved like that, I'd spit in his face and just clear out. *I* wouldn't stand it!"

On the day in question Bertrand Larousselle was quite alone. He heard behind him the whistling of the dirty beast and increased his pace. But Raymond kept on a level with him and never took his eyes off his short covert-coat and cap of handsome English tweed. Everything that had to do with the younger boy fascinated him. Suddenly, Bertrand broke into a run, and a note-book slipped from his satchel. By the time he noticed his loss Raymond had already picked it up. Its owner turned back, his face pale with fear and anger. "Give it me!" he cried: but Raymond read out in a low voice the title on the cover—"My Diary"—and sniggered.

"Young Larousselle's diary—that ought to be pretty juicy!"

"Give it me!"

Raymond sprinted ahead, turned into the Parc Bordelais, and ran down one of the deserted paths. Behind him he could hear a miserable, breathless voice panting out, over and over again, "Give it me! I'll tell them you took it!" But the dirty beast, hidden from view by a thick shrubbery, was engaged in mocking young Larousselle, who, by this time at the end of his tether, was lying full length on the grass and sobbing.

"Here's your beastly note-book, your precious diary. Take it, you little idiot!"

He pulled the boy to his feet, wiped his eyes and brushed down the overcoat of English tweed. Whoever would have thought that the great bully could be so kind! The brat smiled his grati-

tude at Raymond, who, suddenly, could not resist putting into words a vulgar whim of curiosity:

"I say, have you ever seen her—this Maria Cross woman?"

Bertrand, scarlet to the tips of his ears, picked up his satchel and took to his heels. It never even occurred to Raymond to run after him.

Maria Cross . . . it was she now who was devouring *him* with her eyes. He had expected her to look taller, more mysterious. So this small woman in the lilac dress was actually Maria Cross. Noticing his confusion she mistook the cause.

"Please don't think . . ." she stammered. "You mustn't, really . . ."

She trembled in the presence of this judge whom she had viewed in the light of an angelic messenger. She saw no sign of the grubby thoughts of youth, did not know that spring is often the season of mud, and that this growing lad might be mostly composed of filth. She could not endure the contempt which she imagined him to be feeling, and, with a few hurried murmurs of farewell, was already beating her retreat. But he ran after her.

"Tomorrow, same time, same tram?"

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

She made off then, but twice turned her head. He was standing where she had left him, thinking, 'Maria Cross's got a crush on me!' As though he could not believe his good luck, he spoke the words aloud: "Maria Cross's got a crush on me!"

He breathed in the dusk as though it contained the very essence of the universe, as though he could savour it in every nerve and fibre of his exultant body. Maria Cross had got a crush on him! Should he tell his pals? Not one of them would believe it. He could already see before him the leafy prison where the members of one single family dwelt side by side, yet no less cut off from one another than the worlds which make up the Milky Way. How inadequate, this evening, was that cage to house the stature of his pride! He skirted it, and plunged into

a plantation of pines—the only one that was not fenced in. It was called the Bois de Berge. The earth on which he flung himself was warmer than a human body. The pine-needles left deep imprints on the palms of his hands.

When he entered the dining-room his father was cutting the pages of a journal, and saying something in reply to an observation of his wife's.

"I'm *not* reading—just looking at the titles of the articles."

No one but his grandmother seemed to have heard his "Good evening."

"So it's you, you young rascal!"

As he passed her chair, she put out her hand and drew him to her:

"You smell of resin."

"I've been in the pine-woods."

She looked him up and down with an air of knowing tolerance, murmuring an abusive epithet as though it had been an endearment:

"You little horror!"

He lapped up his soup noisily, like a dog. How insignificant all these people seemed to him! He was way up above them, soaring in the sunlight. Only with his father did he feel that he had some connexion, because *he* knew Maria Cross, had been in her house, had attended her professionally, had seen her in bed, had pressed his ear to her chest, her back . . . Maria Cross! . . . Maria Cross! . . . the name choked him like a clot of blood. He could taste its warm saltiness in his mouth. The hot tide of it flooded his cheeks, broke from his control.

"I saw Maria Cross this evening."

The doctor fixed him with a stare.

"How did you recognize her?"

"I was with Papillon—he knows her by sight."

"Hullo!" exclaimed Basque; "Raymond's blushing!"

One of the little girls took up the phrase:

"Oo! Uncle Raymond's blushing!"

He made an ill-tempered movement of the shoulders. His father questioned him again, this time averting his eyes:

"Was she alone?"

At his son's reply—"Quite alone"—he returned to his occupation of cutting pages. Madame Courrèges said:

"It really is extraordinary how much more interested you are in that woman than in any other. What's so very odd, after all, in his having seen that creature in the street? In days gone by, when she was a domestic servant, you wouldn't have paid the slightest attention to her."

There was an interruption from the doctor: "My dear, she never *was* a domestic servant."

"Well, even if she had been," put in Madeleine, and there was a sharp edge to her voice, "that's nothing to be ashamed of—very much to the contrary, I should have thought!"

The maid having left the room with one of the dishes, she turned angrily on her mother:

"It almost looks as though you were deliberately trying to upset the servants and hurt their feelings! Irma has an extremely sensitive nature!"

"So I've got to handle the staff with kid gloves, now, have I? Really, no one would believe the things that go on in this house!"

"You can behave exactly as you like with your own servants: all I ask is that you shouldn't drive other peoples' away . . . especially when you expect them to wait at table!"

"You're not exactly tactful yourself where Julie is concerned, and you've got the reputation of never being able to keep a maid when you do get one. . . . Everyone knows that the only reason *my* servants ever give notice is because they can't get on with yours!"

At this point the maid came back and the altercation was interrupted. But as soon as she had once again returned to the pantry it was resumed in a series of whispers. Raymond studied his father with amusement. Had Maria Cross been a domestic

servant, would *he* have so much as noticed her existence? Suddenly, the doctor raised his head, and, without looking at any of those present, announced:

"Maria Cross is the daughter of the woman who was head mistress of the St. Clair school when your beloved Monsieur Labrousse was curé there, Lucie."

"What? The harpy who used to plague the life out of him? Who preferred to stay away from Mass unless she and her girls could have the front seats in the nave? Well, I can't say I'm surprised: like mother, like daughter."

"Don't you remember," said Madame Courrèges the elder, "that story of poor Monsieur Labrousse's about how, when the Marquis de Lur-Saluces was beaten in the elections by a wretched little attorney from Bazas, she came round in the evening attended by the whole school, and stood under the presbytery windows jeering at him, and how her hands were quite black with letting off fireworks in honour of the new Deputy? . . ."

"A nice lot they were, I must say."

But the doctor did not wait to hear more. Instead of going upstairs as usual to his study, he followed Raymond into the garden.

Both father and son wanted to talk. Unknown to themselves some strong influence was forming a bond between them. It was as though they were harbouring the same secret. In just such a way do initiates and conspirators recognize and seek one another. Each found in the other the one being in the world to whom he could unburden himself of his precious obsession. As two butterflies, separated by miles and miles, meet at the spot that houses the odorous female, so had they followed the convergent tracks of their desires, and alighted side by side on the invisible body of Maria Cross.

"Have you got a cigarette, Raymond? I've forgotten what tobacco tastes like. . . . Thank you. . . . What about taking a turn?"

He heard his own words with amazement. He was like a man

who, having been cured by a miracle, sees the wound that he had thought healed suddenly open again. No longer ago than that morning, in his laboratory, he had been conscious of the lightness of spirit that comes to the devout penitent when he has received absolution. Seeking in his heart some trace of his recent passion, he had found none. How solemnly, and rather priggishly, he had lectured Robinson, who, ever since the spring, had been somewhat neglecting his work for a lady of the chorus.

"My dear chap, the scientist who really loves his work and is consumed with the desire to make a reputation will always regard the hours and minutes given over to sexual passion as so much time wasted."

Robinson had swept back his tousled hair, rubbed his spectacles on his acid-stained overall, and ventured a protest:

"All the same, sir—love . . ."

"No, my boy, for the real scientist, except in brief moments of purely temporary surrender, his work must always take precedence of love. He will, if he sacrifices it, always be haunted by bitter thoughts of the noble satisfaction he might have known if only he had been faithful to his vocation."

"It certainly is true," Robinson had replied, "that most great scientists do occasionally indulge their sexual impulses, but I know scarcely any whom you would call men of really strong passions."

The doctor understood now why it was that this acquiescent attitude on the part of his disciple had brought the colour to his cheeks.

Raymond had only to say, "I saw Maria Cross," for the passion he had thought dead to stir again. Alas! it was merely in a state of torpor . . . a single word could bring it back to life, provide it with the food it craved. It was already stretching its limbs, yawning and getting to its feet. If it couldn't embrace in flesh and blood reality the woman of its choice, it would find relief in speech. No matter what the cost, he *must* talk about Maria Cross.

Though they had been drawn together by a mutual desire to sing Maria Cross's praises, their very first words set father and son at odds. Raymond maintained that a woman of her emotional scope could not but outrage the anæmic susceptibilities of the devout. What he admired in her was her boldness, her limitless ambition, the dissolute life which he imagined her to have led. The doctor, on the contrary, insisted that there was nothing of the courtesan about her, that one must not believe what people said:

"I *know* Maria Cross! I was her best friend during all that time when her little François was so desperately ill, and I still am. . . . She unburdened herself to me. . . ."

"My poor dear father, what you mean is that she pulled the wool over your eyes. . . ."

The doctor controlled himself with an effort. His reply, when it came, was given with considerable warmth:

"You're quite wrong, my boy. She confided in me with quite extraordinary humility. If it is true to say of anybody that their actions bear no resemblance to themselves, it is certainly true to say it of Maria Cross. Incurable laziness has been her undoing. Her mother, the St. Clair school-mistress, got her to work for the entrance examination for the Sèvres Training College, but when she married an army doctor of the 144th regiment all that went by the board. The three years she spent as his wife were uneventful, and if he had lived she would have led an ordinary decent and humdrum existence. The only cause of complaint he had against her was that temperamental indolence to which I have already referred, because it meant that she didn't run his house well. He used to grumble a bit, she told me, when he came home of an evening, at finding that there was nothing for dinner but a dish of noodles heated up over a spirit-lamp. Her favourite occupation was to lie in a torn dressing-gown and slippers, reading all day long. People call her a courtesan, but you'd be surprised if you knew how little mere luxury means to her. Why, only a short time ago she decided to

give up using the car which was Larousselle's present to her, and now she travels by tram like anybody else. . . . What are you laughing at? I don't see anything particularly amusing about that. . . . Stop it! it's getting on my nerves. . . . When she found herself a widow with a child, you may imagine how ill-equipped for work an intellectual woman like that would feel. . . . Unfortunately, a friend of her husband's got her the post of secretary to Larousselle. She was completely innocent of any sort of scheming, but—well, though Larousselle had the reputation of being a harsh employer, he never said a word to her, though she was always late at the office and was hardly ever up to time with her work. That alone was enough to compromise her, and by the time she realized the situation it was too late to do anything about it. The others treated her as the boss's little bit, and their hostility made her position impossible. She spoke to Larousselle about it, which was just what he had been waiting for. He had a small property close to Bordeaux for which, just then, he had failed, or perhaps not wanted, to find a tenant. He suggested that she should act as caretaker until she could land another job. . . ."

"And I suppose she found the suggestion all innocent and above-board? "

"Not at all. Obviously, she realized perfectly well what he was after: but the poor woman was saddled with an establishment far too expensive for her straitened circumstances, and, to crown all, the child was struck down with enteritis, and the doctor thought it essential that he should have country air. Finally, in view of the fact that she was already so deeply compromised, she just hadn't the courage to refuse such a windfall. She let herself be over-persuaded. . . ."

"You're telling *me*! . . ."

"Don't talk like that! You know nothing whatever about her. She stood out for a long time. But what was there for her to do? She couldn't prevent Larousselle from bringing his friends out to dinner. I realize that she was weak and irresponsible, that she

ought to have refused to act as his hostess; but I can assure you that those famous Tuesday evenings were very far from being the hideous orgies of popular imagination. The only thing at all scandalous about them was that they occurred at a time when Madame Larousselle's health had taken a turn for the worse. I can swear that Maria had no idea that her employer's wife was in danger. 'My conscience was clear,' she told me. 'At that time I had not permitted Monsieur Larousselle so much as a kiss. There was nothing between us, absolutely nothing. What harm was there in my presiding over a tableful of fools? . . . I admit that the idea of dazzling them did go to my head. I enjoyed playing the bluestocking. I knew that my employer was proud of me. He had promised to do something for the boy.' "

"And you really swallowed all that? . . ."

What a simpleton his poor father was! But the thing that Raymond really resented was that the doctor should have diminished Maria Cross to the stature of a respectable, weak-willed little school-mistress—and thereby reduced his sense of conquest to nothing.

"She didn't yield to Larousselle's suggestions until after his wife's death, and only then from lassitude, from a sort of despairing apathy—yes, that exactly describes it. She used the phrase herself when describing the situation—a *despairing apathy*. She had no illusions, was perfectly clear-headed. She was not taken in by his assumption of the rôle of inconsolable widower any more than she was by his promise of eventual marriage. She knew too much about men of his type, she told me, to be deluded. As his mistress she was a distinct asset, but things would be very different if she were his wife! I suppose you know that he sent young Bertrand to the Collège de Normandie so that he shouldn't be exposed to contact with her? In his heart of hearts he thought her no different from the common-or-garden drabs with whom he was for ever deceiving her. Besides, I happen to know that their physical intimacy doesn't amount to much. I am convinced of that; you can take my word for it. He, of

course, is mad about her, and he's not the sort of man to be content with having her just for show purposes, as is generally supposed in Bordeaux: but she is adamant. . . ."

"You're not going to tell me that Maria Cross is a saint?"

They could not see one another, but each could sense hostility in the other, though they kept their voices low. They had been brought together for a moment by the name of Maria Cross, and it was her name that separated them now. The man walked with head high: the youth kept his eyes fixed upon the ground and vented his ill-humour by kicking at a pine-cone.

"You think me a fool, but of us two, it is you who are the innocent. If you think only ill of people, you'll never get to know them. You have stumbled on precisely the right word. I know what Maria Cross has been through, and I know that somewhere in her there are the makings of a saint . . . yes, really, a saint. . . . But you could never understand that."

"Don't make me laugh!"

"What do you know about her? You've merely been listening to gossip. I *do* know about her."

"I know what I know."

"And how much may that be?"

The doctor stopped dead in the middle of the path where the chestnut trees threw a deep shade. He gripped Raymond by the arm.

"Oh, let me alone! It's all one to me whether Maria Cross does, or does not, go to bed with Larousselle—but he's not the only pebble on her beach!"

"Liar!"

Raymond was brought up with a shock. "Oh, look here . . ." he muttered. A suspicion had dawned in his mind, only to die out again almost at once, or rather to withdraw from his immediate consciousness. Exasperating his father might be, but he found it no more possible than did Maria to connect the idea of love with the rather neutral image of him which had been his since childhood. He has always seemed to him to be a man

without passions and without sin, a man impervious to evil, incorruptible, living in a world far above the rather earthy concerns of other men. He heard the sound of his rather heavy breathing in the darkness.

The doctor made a violent effort to control his feelings. In a tone that was half-mocking and almost cheerful, he repeated:

"Yes, liar and humbug. All you want to do is to destroy my illusions. . . ."

And, since Raymond remained obstinately silent, he added:

"Go on, out with it. . . ."

"I don't know anything. . . ."

"You said just now—'I know what I know.' "

The boy replied that he had spoken without thinking. His manner was that of someone who has made up his mind to say nothing. The doctor did not press him. This son of his, so close that he could feel the warmth of his body and catch the smell he exuded as of some young and untamed animal, would never understand him.

"I shall stay out here a bit. Won't you sit down a moment, Raymond? There's a breeze getting up at last."

But his son said that he would rather go to bed. For a moment or two longer the doctor heard the sound he made as he kicked at the pine-cones, then he was alone under the dense and drooping leaves—alive to all the passionate melancholy flung heavenward by the sleeping fields. With an immense effort he rose from his seat. The light was burning in his study. 'I suppose Lucie thinks I'm still working. What a lot of time I've wasted! I'm fifty—no, fifty-three. What tittle-tattle has that Papillon boy been repeating?' He let his hands wander over the bark of a chestnut tree where he remembered that Madeleine and Raymond had once carved their initials, and suddenly, flinging his arms about the trunk, closed his eyes and laid his cheek against the smooth surface of the wood. Then he stood back, dusted the sleeves of his jacket, straightened his tie, and walked towards the house.

Sauntering between the vines, Raymond was still amusing himself by kicking a pine-cone. With his hands stuck deep in his trouser pockets, he muttered to himself: 'What a simple-minded old ass! there can't be many of his sort left!' Well, he at least would be equal to his opportunity; no one should lead *him* by the nose. He had no intention of prolonging his happiness through the dragging hours of this stifling night. The stars meant nothing to him, nor the scent of the pale acacia blooms. The assault of the summer darkness was powerless against this well-armed young male who was so sure of his strength in the splendid present, so sure of his young body, so utterly indifferent to all that it could not subdue and penetrate.

VII

WORK, the one and only opium. Each morning the doctor woke, cured of his obsession, as though what had been gnawing at his heart had been cut out by the surgeon's knife. He left the house unaccompanied (in fine weather Raymond did not use the brougham). But his mind raced ahead of him. Already, in imagination, he was at work on his experiments. His passion diminished to a dull throb which made itself felt as a threat rather than an actuality. Whether it would become more than that, would wake again into active life, depended upon him, and upon him alone. Let him but touch the sore spot, and the sudden pain would make him cry out. . . . But yesterday his pet hypothesis had been brought tumbling to the ground by one single fact—or so Robinson assured him. What a triumph for X., who had accused him before the Biological Society of using faulty methods.

One of women's curses is that they can never free themselves of the enemy who preys upon their vitals. And so it happened

that while the doctor, intent on his microscope, was blissfully unaware of his own wretchedness and of the world outside the walls of his laboratory, a prisoner pent within the confines of his observations, Maria Cross, lying on a sofa behind closed shutters, could think of nothing but the moment when she would see Raymond again, of that brief flame which alone brought warmth and brightness into the dreary sequence of her days. But how disappointing the moment was when it came! Almost at once they had had to give up their plan of travelling together as far as Talence church. Maria Cross went on ahead and met him in the Park, not far from the school buildings. He was less forthcoming now than he had been on the occasion of their first exchanges, and his attitude of shy mistrust did much to convince her that he really was only a callow boy, though an occasional snigger, a sudden furtive glance, should have put her on her guard. But she clung to her darling theory of his angelic purity. With infinite precautions, as though she were dealing with an untamed and still unsullied bird, she, as it were, crept closer and closer, walking on tip-toe and holding her breath. Everything about him conspired to strengthen the outlines of that false image of him which she had constructed: the cheeks so prone to blush, the schoolboy slang, the still visible traces of childhood that hung like morning mist about the strong young body. She was terrified by what she thought she had discovered in Raymond, though it had no existence in fact. The candour of his glance set her trembling, and she felt guilty of having brought into that frank gaze a hint of trouble and unease. Nothing occurred to warn her that when they were together he wanted only to run away, the better to gloat on the thought of her and to decide what line he had better take. Should he hire a room? Papillon knew an address, but it was a bit too squalid for a woman of her type. Papillon had told him that one could get rooms by the day at the *Terminus*. He'd have to find out about that. He had already walked up and down outside the hotel without being able to summon up courage enough to make

enquiries at the desk. There might be other difficulties, too, of a physical nature. Over these he brooded until he had made mountains out of molehills.

Maria Cross was playing with the idea of asking him to her house, but of this plan she had, so far, said nothing. She was resolved not to smirch, even in thought, this child of nature, this untamed bird. In the stuffiness of her drawing-room, in the drowsy heat of the garden, their love would burgeon into words, and the storm within her breast would find relief in rain. Beyond this point she would not let imagination go. The extreme of her permitted indulgence was to fancy the feel of his head pressed to her body. He would be to her as a fawn domesticated by kindness . . . she would feel the warm, soft muzzle in her hand. . . . She seemed to see before her a long, long vista of caresses. They must be fond yet chaste. She would not let herself, even in imagination, dwell upon a fiercer pilgrimage of love, upon that ultimate bliss of tangled forest undergrowth into which they might plunge and be lost to all the world. . . . No, no—passion must never be allowed to sweep them to such extremes! Not for all the world would she destroy the childish innocence which filled her with such fear, such adoration. How convey, without startling him into flight, that this very week he might take advantage of Monsieur Larousselle's absence on business in Belgium and venture into the stuffy and encumbered intimacies of her drawing-room? Surely, if she put such a thought into words, he would at once suspect some evil intention? What she did not know was that he took his pleasure of her with far greater satisfaction to himself when they were not together, that she was with him in fancy wherever he went, or that he possessed her, turned from her and possessed her, again and again, like a famished puppy.

At dinner the doctor kept his eyes upon him. He watched him greedily lapping up his soup, and saw, not his son, but a man who had said, speaking of Maria Cross, "I know what I

know. . . ." What could that Papillon possibly have told him? It was no use deceiving himself. Quite obviously, someone of whom he knew nothing was monopolizing Maria's thoughts.' I go on expecting her to write, when it should be perfectly clear that she doesn't want to see me ever again. And if that is true, it means, further, that she has given herself to another . . . but to whom? Impossible to sound the boy any more than I have done. If I insist on his telling me what he knows I shall merely be betraying myself.' At that point in his ruminations his son got up and left the room, without deigning to answer his mother, who called after him: "Where are you off to?"

"He goes into Bordeaux almost every evening now," she said. "I know that he gets the key of the gate from the gardener, and comes in at two a.m. by the scullery window. You ought to hear what he says when I question him. It's for *you* to do something about it, but you're so weak!"

The doctor could only stammer: "The wisest thing is to keep our eyes shut."

He heard Basque's voice: "If he was *my* son I'd bring him to heel soon enough. . . ."

The doctor got up from the table in his turn and went into the garden. He would have liked to cry aloud: "My torment is the only thing that has any reality for me!" No one realizes that it is a father's passions, more often than not, that alienate him from his son. He returned to the house, sat down at his work-table, opened a drawer, took out a packet of letters, and settled down to re-read what Maria had written to him six months earlier:

> "Only the desire to become a better woman reconciles me to the necessity of living. . . . I care little that the world should know of my salvation, or that others should continue to point at me the finger of scorn. . . . Humbly I accept their censure."

He no longer remembered that, when he had read those words for the first time, such extravagance of virtue had filled him with despair, that the obligation to walk with her in so rarefied

an air had been his martyrdom, that it was maddening to think that he was expected to show the way of salvation to the one woman with whom he would so gladly have gone to perdition. He thought how, reading this letter, Raymond would laugh; grew indignant at the fancy, and voiced a protest in a half whisper as though someone were walking at his side. "Bogus, you say? . . . bogus? . . . The trouble is that whenever she gets a pen in her hand she becomes too 'literary.' . . . But was that humility of tenderness when she sat by her dying child bogus, that acquiescence of hers in suffering, as though the mysterious heritage of faith had come down to her through all her mother's tedious rehash of Kantian principles? In the presence of that small bed beneath its load of lilies" (how isolated and alone the body of the dead child had looked, how silently it had seemed to be accusing her!) "she gave expression to her sense of guilt, beating her breast and groaning aloud that all was for the best, finding consolation in the thought that he had been too young to feel ashamed of her. . . ." But here the man of science intervened: 'The truth is rather more complicated. She *was* sincere in her grief, but, all the same, she got a certain amount of satisfaction out of her heroics—they gave her the excuse to strike an attitude.' Maria Cross had always had an appetite for situations of high romance. Hadn't she even gone so far as to play with the idea of having an interview with Madame Larousselle on her death-bed? It was only with the utmost difficulty that he had made her realize that scenes of that kind never "come off" except on the stage. She had given up the plan, but only on condition that he should undertake to plead her cause with the wife. Luckily, he had been able to assure her that she had been forgiven.

He went to the window, and, leaning out in the half-darkness, occupied his mind with analysing the various night sounds—a continuous scraping of crickets and grasshoppers, the croaking of two frogs in a pond, the intermittent notes of a bird that probably wasn't a nightingale, the clanging of the last tram. "I

know what I know," Raymond had said. Who could it be that had caught Maria's fancy? The doctor pronounced one or two names, but at once rejected them. She had a horror of those particular men. But of whom *hadn't* she a horror? 'Remember what Larousselle told you in confidence that time he came to have his blood-pressure tested—"Quite between outselves, she doesn't really enjoy—you know what I mean. She puts up with it from me because, well, with me it's rather different. . . . It really was screamingly funny the first time I asked all these chaps to the house. They fluttered round her like moths. When a man introduces one to his mistress, one's first thought, isn't it? is whether one can cut him out. . . . Go ahead, my fine fellows, said I to myself . . . and, of course, nothing happened. They were all quite quietly kept in their place. No one knows less about love than Maria, and takes so little pleasure in it—and I'm speaking about what I know. She's as innocent as you make 'em, doctor, a great deal more innocent than most of the fine respectable ladies who turn up their noses at her." ' He had said, too: "It is because Maria is so completely unlike other women that I'm always terrified lest, some time when I'm not there, she may make some absurd decision. She spends her whole day in a sort of dream, and only leaves the house to go to the cemetery. D'you think it possible that she has been influenced by something she has read?"

'It may be something she's read,' thought the doctor: 'but, no; if it were I should have heard about it: books are my line of country. A book sometimes turns a *man's* life upside down, or so one's told, but does the same hold true of women? It's only life that really and truly affects them deeply, things of flesh and blood. A book?'—he shook his head. The word book brought "buck" to his mind, and he had a sudden vision of some wild young animal rearing at Maria's approach.

Some cats in the grass set up a prolonged miaowing. A footstep sounded on the gravel: there was the noise as of a window

being opened. It must be Raymond coming back. A moment later the doctor heard someone in the corridor. There was a knock at his door. It was Madeleine.

"Not in bed yet, Papa? I'm worried about Catherine. She suddenly started a nasty hacking cough. I was afraid it might be croup."

"Croup doesn't come on suddenly like that. I'll be along in a moment."

Some time later, as he was coming out of his daughter's room, he felt a pain in his left side, and stood leaning against the wall in the darkness, clutching at his heart. He did not call for help. His brain was perfectly clear, and he could catch from behind the door the sounds of a conversation that had just started between husband and wife.

"I know all about his being a good scientist, but science has made him sceptical. He no longer believes in medicines. But how can illness be cured without them?"

"He assured us it was nothing, not even a false-croup."

"Don't kid yourself: if it had been one of his own patients he'd have prescribed something, but because it's one of the family he's not going to spend an unnecessary penny. There are times when it's an awful nuisance not being able to call in an outside man."

"But it's very convenient having him always on the spot, especially at night. When the poor old thing's no longer there, I shall never know what it is to sleep in peace, worrying about the children."

"You ought to have married a doctor, that's what *you* ought to have done!"

There was a sound of a laugh being quickly silenced by a kiss. The doctor felt the hand that was squeezing his heart loosen its grip. Very quietly he stole away. He turned in, found that he could not lie at full length without pain, and spent the night sitting upright on his bed. The whole world was asleep. The only sound was the fluttering of the leaves. 'Has Maria ever known

what it is to love? I know she's had crazes for people—for instance, there was that little Gaby Dubois girl, she tried to make her break with young Dupont-Gunther, but that was a romantic passion. She must have had some apostolic ancestor from whom she inherits that taste of hers for saving souls. Who was it, by the way, who told me a lot of beastly things about her, in connexion with this same Gaby? . . . Can she be "one of them"? I remember other crazes of the same kind. . . . There may be a touch of it in her case. I've always noticed that an excess of romanticism . . . Dawn already!'

He lowered his pillow, and with many precautions lay down in such a way that his wretched carcase suffered no hurt. In a few moments he had lost consciousness.

VIII

"BUT what am I going to say to the gardener?"

In one of the deserted paths of the Parc Bordelais Maria Cross was trying to persuade Raymond to pay her a visit at home. In her own house there would be no risk of their meeting people. She urged him to agree, and felt ashamed of doing so, felt that, in spite of herself, she was corrupting him. How was it possible not to see in the unreasoning terror of a boy who had once walked up and down in front of a shop because he didn't dare go in, the indisputable evidence of frightened innocence? With that thought in her mind she hastened to say:

"But, Raymond, you mustn't think I want . . . you mustn't start imagining. . . ."

"It'll be so awkward if I run into the gardener."

"But there *isn't* a gardener: I've told you so already. I'm living in an empty house which Monsieur Larousselle had not succeeded in letting. He has installed me there as caretaker."

Raymond burst into a guffaw of laughter:

"A lady gardener, eh?"

The young woman looked down so that he should not see her face, and stammered out:

"I *know* appearances are against me. After all, people can't be expected to know that I accepted the situation in perfect good faith. . . . François had to have country air. . . ."

Raymond was familiar with this particular refrain. 'Talk away,' he said to himself, and broke in with:

"So I needn't worry about the gardener, but what about the servants?"

She reassured him on that point too. On Sundays she always let Justine, her only maid, go out. She was a married woman whose husband, a chauffeur, slept in the house so as to ensure there being a man about the place, which was none too well protected. The suburban road was not very safe. But on Sunday afternoons Justine and he always went out together. Raymond would merely have to enter by the front door and go through the dining-room on the left. He would find the drawing-room at the far end.

He dug his heel into the gravel with a thoughtful air. The creaking of a swing could be heard coming from behind a privet-hedge. An old woman was hawking stale cakes and bars of chocolate done up in yellow paper. Remarking that he had had no lunch, he bought a crescent and a chocolate praliné. As she watched him munching his meagre meal, Maria suddenly saw with perfect clarity the inexorable nature of her destiny. The desire that had come to birth in her heart had been pure and limpid, yet her every action had the appearance of a monstrous depravity. When, in the tram, her eyes had first found rest and refreshment in the young face opposite, there had been no trace of evil intention in her mind. Why should she have fought against a temptation that was so little suspect? A thirsty traveller has no reason to beware of the stream he happens on. 'I *do* want him to come to my house, but only because in the streets, on

the bench of a public garden, I shall never succeed in probing his secret self. . . . But that doesn't alter the fact that, so far as appearances go, here is a young kept woman of twenty-seven luring a young boy into her web—the son of the only man who has ever believed in me and has never cast a stone. . . .' A little later, after they had parted, and just before reaching the Croix de Saint-Genès, her thoughts returned to the subject: 'I want him to come, but with no evil design, not the least in the world. The very idea of such a thing makes me feel sick. But he doesn't trust me, and why should he? Everything I do is double-faced: to me it looks innocent enough, but to the world, hateful, abominable. Perhaps the world sees more truly than I do. . . .' She spoke first one name, then another. If it were true that she was held in contempt for actions in which she had become unintentionally involved, she could remember others that she had done in secret, others of which no one knew but herself.

She pushed open the gate which, next Sunday, Raymond would unlatch for the first time, and walked up the drive which was overgrown with grass (there was no gardener). So heavily did the sky seem to sag that it was hard to believe the overarching cloud would not burst with its own weight—it was as though the heavens had caught discouragement from a thirsty world. The leaves hung blighted from the trees. The maid had not closed the shutters, and great bluebottles were bumping against the bottom of the window frames. She had only just energy enough to throw her hat on to the piano. Her shoes left dirty marks on the sofa. There was only one thing possible to do —light a cigarette. But she was aware, too, of something no less habitual, the physical apathy that accompanied the activity of her imagination, no matter how wrought-up that might be. What an endless number of afternoons she had wasted. lying just here, feeling slightly sick as the result of over-smoking! How many plans of escape, of self-betterment, she had elaborated, only to see them fall in ruins! To bring them to fruition she would have had, first, to stop lying there supine, to do

something positive, to see people. 'But even if I abandon all attempt to improve the external conditions of my life, I can at least refuse to do anything of which my conscience would disapprove, which might cause it to feel uneasy. Take, for instance, this case of young Courrèges. . . .' She had quite decided that if she were about to lure him into her house it was only because she wanted to indulge that sweet and harmless sentiment which had come to her, originally, in the six o'clock tram; that sense of comfort in another's presence, that melancholy pleasure of quite quietly letting her eyes take their fill—though here, in this room, she would taste it more intimately than had been possible in the tram, and at greater leisure. But was that really all? When the presence of another person thrills us emotionally, our imagination leaps ahead, though we may not always realize it, opening up vistas the very vagueness of which has something about them that is not wholly innocent: 'Very soon I should have grown tired merely of looking at him had it not been that I felt convinced that he would respond to my handling, that, sooner or later, we should speak to one another. . . . This room, so far as I can foresee, will witness nothing but motherly caresses and unimpassioned kisses, will hear nothing but spoken confidences. . . . Oh, come now, be honest with yourself! Admit that you *are* aware of the existence, beyond such innocuous happiness, of a whole region of the emotions, forbidden, it is true, yet open to exploration. There will be no barrier to break down. The field of action will lie open before you. You have only to work your way cautiously forward, to lose yourself in the misty distance as though by accident. . . . And afterwards? Who is there to forbid you the enjoyment of this delight: . . . Don't you know that you could make the boy happy? . . . Ah, that's where you begin to be the dupe of your own appetites. . . . He is the son of Dr. Courrèges, of the saintly Dr. Courrèges. . . . *He* wouldn't admit that the case was even open to argument. You once told him jokingly that the moral law within him was as bright and shining as the starry sky above his head. . . .'

She could hear the raindrops on the leaves, the tentative rumble of the storm. She closed her eyes, tried to fix her thoughts, concentrated her mind on the beloved face of the young boy whose innocence was wholly unsmirched (or that was what she wanted to believe), the boy who, at that very moment, was hurrying along in an attempt to outstrip the coming storm, and thinking: 'Papillon says it's always best to take the bull by the horns. With women of that kind, he says, brutality's the only thing that counts, the only thing they really like. . . .' With his thoughts in turmoil he looked up at the growling heavens. Suddenly he began to run, his cape flung over his head, took a short cut and jumped over a patch of shrubbery as nimbly as a buck. The storm was moving away, but it was still there. The very silence betrayed its presence. Maria had a sudden inspiration which she felt certain could not be misunderstood. She got up, sat down at her desk, and wrote:

"Don't come Sunday—or any other day. It is for your sake, and for your sake only, that I agree to this sacrifice. . . ."

She should have left it at that, and just signed her name. But some devillish counsellor persuaded her to add a whole page more:

". . . You will have been the one and only happiness of a tormented and hopeless life. As we travelled home together all through this last winter, the sight of you brought me peace, though you did not know it. But the face that was your gift to me was but the outward and visible sign of a soul which I longed to possess. I wanted there to be nothing about you that I did not know. I wanted to provide the answer to your uncertainties, to smooth the path before your feet, to become for you someone who would be more than a mother, better than a friend. I lived in my dream of that. But it is not in my power to be other than I am. In spite of yourself, in spite of me, you would breathe the corruption with which the world has choked me."

On and on she wrote. The rain had settled in for good, and the only sound to be heard was that of falling water. The windows of all the rooms were shut. Hail-stones rattled in the hearth. Maria Cross took up a book, but it was too dark to read, and, because of the storm, the electricity was not working. She sat down at the piano, and leaned forward as she played. It was as though her head were drawn by some attraction to her hands.

The next day, which was Friday, she felt vaguely pleased that the storm had broken the spell of heat, and spent the whole day in a dressing-gown, reading, making music, idling. She tried to recall every word of her letter, to imagine the effect it would have on young Courrèges. On Saturday, after a close and heavy morning, the rain began again. She realized then the reason for her pleasure. The bad weather would prevent her from going out on Sunday, as she had meant to do, so that should the boy after all, keep their appointment in spite of her letter, she would be there to receive him. Stepping back from the window through which she had been watching the rain splashing on the garden path, she said aloud in a firm, strong voice as though she were taking a solemn oath: "Whatever the weather, I shall go out."

But where should she go? Had François been alive she would have taken him to the circus. It was her habit, sometimes, to go to a concert, where she would sit alone in a private box, or—and this she preferred—would take a seat in a public one. But on these occasions the audience always quickly recognized her. She could guess, from the movement of their lips, that people were talking about her. Levelled opera-glasses delivered her up, at close range and utterly defenceless, to a world of enemies. A voice would say: "When all's said, women like that *do* know how to dress—but then, of course, with all that money it's not difficult; besides, they've nothing to think about *except* their bodies." Occasionally one of Monsieur Larousselle's friends would leave the Club Box and pay her a visit. Half turned

towards the audience he would laugh loudly, proud of being seen in conversation with Maria Cross.

Except for the Saint-Cecilia concert she had, even during François's life-time, given up going anywhere. This change in her habits had occurred after several women had insulted her at a music hall. The mistresses of all these various men hated her because she had never shown herself willing to be on terms of familiarity with them. The only one of them who, for a short while, had found favour in her eyes was Gaby Dubois. The girl, she had decided, on the strength of a brief exchange of talk one evening at the *Lion Rouge*, whither Larousselle had dragged her, was a "sweet creature." The champagne had had a good deal to do with Gaby's spiritual effervescence on that occasion. For a whole fortnight the two had met daily. With dogged determination Maria Cross had vainly tried to break the links that bound her new friend to her various other acquaintances. Then they had begun to see less and less of one another, and a little while later, during a matinée at the *Apollo* into which Maria had drifted from sheer boredom, alone as usual, and, as usual, drawing all eyes, she had heard, coming from a row of stalls just beneath the box where she was sitting, Gaby's shrill laughter. Other laughs had mingled with it, and odds and ends of insulting comment had reached her ears, though the voices had been kept low. "That tart who gives herself the airs of an Empress . . . —— who's always putting on a virtue act. . . ." It had seemed to Maria that all the faces in the theatre were turned towards her—and the faces were the faces of wild beasts. Then the lights had gone down, all eyes had been riveted on a nude dancer, and she had slipped away.

After that she would never leave the house without her little boy François. And now, even though a year had passed since he had vanished, it was still he alone who could tempt her out, or rather, that grave-stone, no longer than a child's body, though to reach it she had to walk along the special avenue in the cemetery marked "Adults." But Fate had ordained that on the

way leading to the dead boy another, living boy, should cross her path.

On Sunday morning there was a great wind—not one of those winds that serves to dandle the piled clouds, but a roarer from the south with the smell of the sea, and driving before it a sweep of muffled sky. The note of a solitary tit only emphasized the silence of a million other birds. There could be no question of going out in such weather, which was a nuisance: but by this time young Courrèges would have had her letter. Aware of the extent of his shyness, she felt sure that he would obey her injunction. Even had she not written he would probably never have dared to cross her threshold. She smiled to herself as she conjured up a vision of him digging his heel into the gravel of the drive, and saying to himself, with that mulish expression which she knew so well: "What about the gardener?" While she ate her solitary luncheon she could hear the storm raging round the house. The flying horses of the wind galloped madly on, and now, their task accomplished, were whinnying and snorting among the trees. No doubt from the cloven turmoil of the deep Atlantic they had brought flights of gulls seeking the sanctuary of the river, and kittywakes that hold the air and do not settle. A livid colouring of seaweed seemed to tint the clouds of this suburban sky, a salty scud to splash the inland foliage. Leaning from her window that gave upon the garden, Maria had the taste of it upon her lips. No, he would not come: how should he in such weather, even if she had not sent her letter? Had she not been sure of that she would have known an agony of apprehension lest he might suddenly appear. Far, far better to feel that she was safe, to know for certain that he would not come. And yet, had expectation been wholly absent, why should she open the sideboard cupboard just to make sure that there was some port left?

At last the rain began to fall in a solid curtain shot with vagrant sunlight. She opened a book, but her eyes would not take in the

sense of what she read. Patiently she went back to the top of the page, but in vain. Then, seated at the piano, she began to play, but not so loudly that she could not hear the sound made by the opening of the front door. She was overcome by dizziness, and just had time to say to herself: 'It's the wind, it must be the wind,' and, a moment later, though the shuffle of hesitating footsteps reached her from the dining-room—'It's just the wind.' She had not strength enough to get up from her chair. He was already in the room, awkward, embarrassed, not knowing what to do with his streaming hat. He did not dare to take a step forward, nor did she call to him, so powerless was she in the tumult of a passion that had burst its banks and was sweeping all before it, vengeful and frantic. In a moment it engulfed her, leaving no inch of body or soul unfilled, topping the peaks, drowning the roots, of her being. Nevertheless, when she did at last manage to speak, her expression was stern, her words no more than ordinary.

"Didn't you get my letter?"

He stood there dumbfounded. ("She wants to lead you up the garden," Papillon had said. "Don't let her put you where she wants you. Just stroll in on her with your hands in your pockets.") But, faced by what he took to be her anger, he hung his head like a schoolboy in disgrace. And she, tense and trembling with emotion, as though what she had caught in this stuffy trap of her over-furnished interior was a frightened fawn, could venture on no movement. He had come, though she had done everything in her power to keep him away. Therefore no remorse could poison this, her happiness. She could surrender to it wholly. To that destiny which had precipitated the boy into this room as food for her hunger, she swore that she would be worthy of the gift. Of what had she been afraid? There was nothing in her mind at this moment but love at its noblest. If that truth needed to be proved, proof lay in the tears which she checked, thinking of François. In a very few years he would have grown to be just such a boy as this. . . . She could not know that

Raymond had interpreted the face she made in her effort not to cry as a sign of ill-humour, perhaps of anger.

She said: "After all, why not? You did well to come. Put your hat down on one of the chairs. It doesn't matter if it's damp; it's not the first wet hat their Genoa velvet has seen. . . . I'm sure you'd like a glass of port now, wouldn't you? Yes, or course you would."

While he was drinking she went on:

"Why did I write that letter? Honestly, I don't know. . . . Women do funny things . . . and then, of course, I knew you'd come in any case."

Raymond wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"All the same, I jolly nearly didn't come. I said to myself—she'll probably be out, and I shall look an awful fool."

"I hardly ever go out—since I've been in mourning. I've never talked to you about my little François, have I?"

François had come tip-toeing as though he were in very truth alive. Just so might his mother have kept him by her to break a dangerous tête-à-tête. But Raymond saw no more in her words than a trick designed to make him keep his distance, though Maria's only thought was to put him at his ease. Far from fearing him, she thought that she was an object of fear. Besides, this intrusion of the dead child was not of her contriving. The little boy had forced his presence on them. He had come as children do, when, hearing their mother's voice in the drawing-room, they enter without knocking. 'The mere fact that he is there proves, you poor dear, the purity of your intentions. What's worrying you? François is standing by your chair, not blushing but smiling.'

"It's rather more than a year since he died, isn't it? I very well remember the day of the funeral. Mother made a scene . . ."

He broke off. He would have unsaid the words if he could have done so.

"A scene, why? Ah, yes, I understand. Even on that day there was no pity in people's hearts."

She rose, fetched an album, and laid it on Raymond's knees.

"I should like to show you his photographs. No one but your father has seen them. That's him at a month old, in my husband's arms. When they're as young as that they look like nothing on earth—except to their mothers. Look at this one, with a ball in his arms—laughing. That was taken when he was two. *This* was when we were at Salies. He was already ailing. I had to sell out some of my tiny capital to pay for our trip. But the doctor there was kindness and generosity itself. He was called Casamajor . . . that's him, holding the donkey's bridle. . . ."

As she leaned over Raymond to turn the pages, she was quite innocently pouring oil on the flames, stoking the blaze. Her breath fanned the fire within him. She could not see the look of fury on his face. There he sat, the heavy album weighing down his knees. He was breathing heavily and trembling with frustrated violence.

"Here he is at six and a half, just two months before he died. He looks much better, doesn't he? But I can't help wondering whether I didn't make him work too hard. When he was six he read everything that came his way, even books he couldn't understand. Living as he did, all the time with grown-ups."

"You see," she said, "he was my companion, my friend"—because, at this moment, she could make no distinction between what François had been for her in actuality and what she had hoped he might become.

"Even then he used to ask me questions. What nights of torment I went through thinking that one day I should have to explain. The only thing that consoles me now is the realization that he went without knowing . . . that he never knew . . . that now he never will know. . . ."

She was standing upright, her arms hanging at her side. Raymond dared not raise his eyes, but he could hear the rustling of her movements. Struck though he was by her words, he had an uneasy suspicion that her grief was not altogether genuine. Later, when he was walking home, he said to himself: 'She was

playing a game, and taking herself in with it. . . . She was running the dead-child business for all it was worth. Still, there's no getting away from it, she *was* crying.' He was shaken in the idea he had formed of her. In his youth and inexperience he had painted for himself a picture of "bad women" that was entirely theological in character and modelled on what his masters had told him, convinced though he was that he had successfully resisted their influence. Maria Cross hemmed him in like an army ordered for battle. On her ankles tinkled the bangles of Delilah and of Judith. There was no treachery, no trickery that he would have put beyond one whose glance the saints had dreaded like the glance of death.

Maria Cross said to him: "Come and see me whenever you like: I am always here." With tears in her eyes and peace in her heart, she went with him to the door, without even fixing another day for their next meeting. When he had gone, she sat down by François's bed, carrying her sorrow like a sleeping child in her arms. The tranquillity she felt may have been the result of disappointment. She did not know that she would not always be safe. The dead cannot help the living. In vain do we invoke them from the edge of the abyss. Their silence, their absence, seems to take sides against us.

IX

IT would have been far better for Maria Cross if this, Raymond's first visit, had not left her with an impression of security and innocence. She was amazed that everything had gone so smoothly. 'I worked myself up unnecessarily,' she thought. She believed her predominant feeling to be one of relief, but already she felt unhappy in the knowledge that she had let Raymond go without arranging for another meeting.

She was careful now never to go out at the times he might be likely to come. So simple is the squalid game of passion that a youth can master it on his very first adventuring into love. It needed no worldly-wise counsellor to persuade this one to "let her cook in her own juice."

After waiting for four days, she was in a fit state to lay all the blame for his silence on herself. 'I talked to him about nothing but my own troubles, and about François. It must have been terribly depressing for him. What possible interest could he take in my album? I ought to have asked him about his life. . . . I ought to have laid myself out to win his confidence. . . . He is bored with me . . . thinks me just a tedious woman. . . . What if he never comes back?'

What if he never came back? To such an extent did she worry over the possibility, that it was well on the way to becoming a torment. 'I may wait as long as I like, he won't come. I have lost my hold on him. He's at the age when young men don't suffer bores gladly. Better face it, the whole thing is over and done with. . . .' The evidence was too shattering, too terrible. He would never come back. Maria Cross had filled up the last well to be found in her desert. Nothing now but sand. The most dangerous of all things in love is the flight of one of the parties to the plot. The presence of the adored is, more often than not, an obstacle to passion. When she was with Raymond Courrèges she saw, in the first place, a young creature whose innocent heart it would be a crime to disturb. She remembered whose son he was. The last traces of childhood in his face reminded her of her own lost boy. Even in thought she could not draw near that young body save with a sense of ardent modesty. But now that he was no longer there, now that she feared she might never see him again, of what use was it any longer to mistrust the muddied waters of her heart, the dark confusion of her feelings? Now that this fruit was to be dashed from her thirsty lips, why deprive herself of the satisfaction of imagining the flavour she would never know in fact? Whom would she wrong by so

doing? What reproach need she fear at sight of the headstone on which the name of François was engraved? Who was there to see her shut away in this house, without a husband, without a child, without servants? Madame Courrèges's endless lamentations about the quarrels of her domestic staff might be trivial enough, but how glad would Maria Cross have been to occupy her mind with such things? Where was there for her to go? Beyond the drowsing garden stretched the suburban roads, and further still the stone-built city where, when a storm bursts, one knows for certain that nine days of stifling heat will follow. A fierce and torpid beast seems to prowl, to growl, to crouch in a sky drained of all colour. She too, pacing like a beast the garden or the empty rooms, yielded (how else could her misery find an issue?) little by little to the fascination of a hopeless love, a love that could offer nothing but the wretched happiness of a self-consuming anguish. She gave up all attempt to put out the fire, no longer suffered from aimlessness and lassitude, since she had no thoughts now for anything but the blaze. A nameless devil whispered in her ear: "You may be dying, but at least you are not bored!"

What is strange about a storm is not its tumult but the silence, the torpor which it imposes upon the world. Maria could see the leaves lying motionless against the panes of the window, almost as though painted on them. There was something human about the drooping melancholy of the trees. It was as though they were conscious of their lifelessness, their numbed and sleeping state. Her mood was one in which passion takes on the semblance of a physical presence. She scratched at the sore place in her soul: she kept the fire in her heart alive. Her love was becoming a choking contraction which, had she so wished, she could have localized in her throat, in her chest. A mere letter from Monsieur Larousselle had the power to make her shudder with disgust. As to the idea of his making approaches to her, *that* from now on would be no longer possible for her to endure. He would not be back for another fortnight—time enough in which

to die. She gorged her imagination on thoughts of Raymond, on certain memories that formerly would have overwhelmed her with a sense of shame. 'I looked at the leather lining of his hat, where it presses against his forehead . . . seeking in it the very smell of his hair. . . .' She yearned for his face, for his neck, for his hands, for all and each of them had become the incomparable signs and symbols of a secret reality which was filled to overflowing with delight. . . . How inconceivable was this new tranquillity at the heart of her despair. Sometimes the thought came to her that so long as he was alive nothing was lost; that maybe he would return. But as though there were something terrifying in the hope which such dreaming implied, she hastened to immure herself once more in an absolute renunciation, in the peace of mind that refuses to expect. There was for her a horrible pleasure in digging still deeper the gulf which separated her from the being whom she forced herself to see as pure. The inaccessible youth blazed in her firmament bright as the hunter Orion, and no less remote from her passion. 'I am already a woman burned up by life, a woman lost, while he has about him still the magic of childhood. His purity has set great spaces of sky between us, across which my longing refuses even to blaze a trail.'

All through these days winds from the west and south drew after them great tumbled ranks of cloud, legions of grumbling vapour which, just as they were about to burst in a torrential downpour, suddenly hesitated, turned round about the charmed and toppling peaks of æther, and disappeared, leaving behind them that sudden sense of freshness which comes when somewhere rain has fallen.

In the night hours between Friday and Saturday the rain at last set in with an unbroken sound of murmuring waters. Thanks to the chloral that she had taken, Maria, at peace with all the world, breathed in the scented air which, through the blinds, the garden wafted to her tumbled bed. Then she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Lying there relaxed under the early morning sun, she thought with amazement of all the suffering she had been through. She must have been mad. Why had she seen everything in such gloomy colours? The boy was alive: he was merely waiting for a sign from her. The crisis past, she felt once more clear-headed, balanced, perhaps even slightly disappointed. 'Is that all it was?' she thought. 'He'll come, and just to make doubly sure, I'll write. . . . I'm going to see him again.' At all costs she must confront her misery and the youth that caused it. She forced herself to contemplate in memory only a simple, inoffensive child, and was surprised to find that she no longer trembled at the thought of his head upon her knees. 'I'll write to the doctor telling him that I have made the acquaintance of his son' (but she knew that she would not). 'Why shouldn't I? What harm are we doing?' In the afternoon she went into the garden with its waste of puddles. She felt really at peace, too wholly at peace, so much at peace that she was vaguely frightened. The less she felt her passion, the more she felt the threat of nothingness. Reduced in stature, her love no longer obliterated her inner emptiness. Already she was regretting that her round of the garden had lasted only a bare five minutes, and made the circuit once again, following the same paths. Then she hurried back because the grass had made her feet wet. . . . She would change into slippers, would lie down, smoke, read . . . but what? She had no book on hand that really interested her. As she approached the house she raised her eyes to the windows, and there, behind the drawing-room panes, saw Raymond. He was pressing his face to the glass, amusing himself by squashing his nose flat. Was this rising tide of feeling in her, joy? She walked up the front steps, thinking of the feet that, but a moment before, had pressed them. She pushed open the door, her eyes fixed on the latch because of the hand that had rested on it, crossed the dining-room at a slower pace, composed her features.

It was Raymond's misfortune that he should have come immediately after the long train of days during which she had

dreamed so exclusively of him, and suffered so much on his account. Seeing him there in the flesh, she could not fill the void between the endless agitation of her heart and the being who had caused it. She did not know that she was disappointed. That she was, her first remark soon proved:

"Have you just been to the barber?" She had never seen him look like this before, with his hair cut far too short, and shining. She touched the faint scar left above his temple by some blow.

"I got that falling off a swing when I was eight."

She looked at him, trying to bring into focus her desire, her pain, her hunger, her renunciation, and this long, lean youth who looked so like an overgrown puppy. A thousand feelings, all to do with him, surged up within her, and those of them she could retain grouped themselves, for good or ill, about the taut, congested face. But she failed to recognize the peculiar expression in his eyes that betokened the blind fury of the timid man who has decided to try his luck, of the coward who has screwed himself to the sticking-point. Never to her had he looked so much like a child, and she said with an air of kindly authority what, so often, in the old days, she had said to François:

"Are you thirsty? I'll give you some red-currant syrup in a moment: but you must cool down first."

She directed him to an armchair, but he chose to sit on the sofa where she had already lain down. He protested that he wasn't a bit thirsty:

". . . and if I were, it wouldn't be for syrup."

Her legs were rather too much exposed, and she pulled down her skirt. The action provoked a compliment:

"What a pity!"

She changed her position and sat down beside him. He asked her why:

"It couldn't be that you're afraid?"

His words made Maria realize that that was precisely what she was. But afraid of what? This was Raymond Courrèges, young Courrèges, the doctor's son.

"How is your dear father?"

He shrugged his shoulders and stuck out his lower lip. She offered him a cigarette which he refused, lit one herself, and leaned forward, her elbows on her knees:

"You told me once before that you aren't on very intimate terms with your father. That's natural enough. . . . Relations between parents and children are never easy. . . . When François used to hide his face against my knees, I always thought to myself—make the most of it, it won't always be like this."

She had misinterpreted the movement of his shoulders, the pouting of his lips. Just now he wanted to push the memory of his father into the background—not from any feeling of indifference, but, on the contrary, because the thought of the elder man had become an obsession with him since something odd that had happened two evenings before. After dinner the doctor had joined him on the path that ran between the vines, where he was smoking a solitary cigarette, and had walked beside him in silence, like a man who has something to say but does not say it. 'What's he after?' Raymond had wondered, indulging to the full the cruel pleasure of silence—that same pleasure which he gave himself on early autumn mornings in the carriage, with the rain streaming down the windows. Mechanically, he had quickened his pace, because he saw that his father had difficulty in keeping up with him, and was lagging a little behind. Realizing suddenly that he could no longer hear the sound of his breathing, he had turned his head. He could see the vague outline of the doctor standing there motionless on the path between the vine shoots. His two hands were clutching at his chest, and he was swaying on his feet like a drunken man. He took a few paces forward, and then sat down heavily between two of the rows. Raymond dropped to his knees and raised the seemingly dead face to rest on his shoulder. Only a few inches separated them. He had looked at the closed eyes, at the cheeks that had taken on the colour of dough.

'What's the matter, Papa, Papa, *dear?*"

The sound of his voice, at once beseeching and authoritative, roused the sick man as though it possessed some peculiar virtue. He tried to smile, but looked bewildered, and his words, when they came, were breathless.

"It's nothing. . . . I shall be all right. . . ."

He fixed his eyes on his son's worried face, heard in his voice the same note of tenderness that it had had when he was a boy of eight.

"Rest your head against me: haven't you got a clean handkerchief? Mine's dirty."

Very gently Raymond wiped the face in which, now, there were signs of returning life. The eyes were open, gazing at the boy's hair which the wind was lightly fluttering. Behind him was the dense foliage of a vine plant, and, further still, a yellowish sky full of growls and grumblings. It sounded as though it were emptying cartloads of stones. Leaning on his son's arm, the doctor returned to the house. The warm rain splashed their shoulders and their cheeks, but it was impossible to walk any faster. He had said to Raymond:

"It's this false angina—just as painful as the real thing. I'm suffering from a form of auto-intoxication. . . . I'll stay in bed for forty-eight hours on a diet of water . . . and remember, not a word about this to your granny or your mother."

But Raymond broke in on him with words of his own:

"You're not kidding me? You're *sure* it's nothing? Swear to me that it's nothing."

In a low voice, the doctor said:

"Would you mind so much, then, if I . . ."

But Raymond would not let him finish. He put his arm about the body that was shaking with its gasping efforts to draw breath, and his protest came in a sudden cry:

"What an old *idiot* you are!"

The doctor was to remember later the sweet insolence of the words, to remember it in the bad times when once again his

child had turned into a stranger and an enemy . . . into someone whose heart was deaf to all appeals, who was incapable of responding. . . .

They went together into the drawing-room, but the father dared not venture an embrace.

"Let's talk about something else: I didn't come here to chat about Papa . . . we've got better things to do than that . . . haven't we?"

He thrust forward a large and awkward paw, but she caught hold it of before it had attained its goal, restraining it with gentle insistence.

"No, Raymond, no. You live too close to him really to understand. Those closest to us are always the ones we know least about. . . . We reach a point at which we can't even see what lies beneath our eyes. Do you know, my relations always thought of me as ugly, because when I was a child I had a slight squint. I was amazed, when I went to school, to find that the other girls regarded me as pretty."

"That's right, tell me nice little stories about when you were at school!"

His fixed obsession made him look prematurely old. Maria dared not let go of the great hand. She could feel it growing damp, and a feeling that was almost disgust took hold of her. This was the same hand whose touch, ten minutes ago, had made her turn pale. There had been a time when merely to hold it in hers had compelled her to shut her eyes and turn away her head; and now, it was just a flabby, clammy object.

"I want to show you what the doctor's really like, and when I've made up my mind I can be as obstinate as a mule."

He stopped her by saying that he, too, could be obstinate.

"Look here, I swore that to-day I wouldn't be played with. . . ."

He spoke in a low voice, stumbling over his words; so low, indeed, that it was not difficult for her to pretend that she had

not heard. But she increased the space between them. Then, after a moment, she got up and opened one of the windows:

"It's stifling in here—just as though it hadn't rained at all! But I can still hear the storm, unless it's gunfire from Saint-Médard."

She pointed to where, above the trees, a dense, dark cloud showed a wind-tossed summit edged with sunlight. But he seized her forearm in both his hands and pushed her towards the sofa. She forced a laugh—"Let go!"—and the more she struggled, the more she laughed, to prove that this wrestling match was just a game, and that she regarded it as such. "Let me alone, you nasty little creature! . . ." The lines of laughter about her lips became a grimace. She stumbled against the divan, and saw, only a few inches away, the myriad drops of sweat on his low forehead, the black-heads on his nose. She could smell his sour breath. But the young faun strove to hold both her wrists in one hand so as to have the other free for what he wanted to do, and with one convulsive wriggle she freed herself. There was now between them the sofa, a table and an armchair. She was rather breathless, but again forced herself to laugh.

"So you really think, my child, that you can take a woman by force?"

He did not laugh, the young male humiliated and infuriated by defeat, touched in the most sensitive part of that pride of body which was already abnormally developed in him, so that it bled. All his life he was to remember this particular moment when a woman had found him not only repellent but grotesque. No matter how often he might be victorious in days to come, no matter how many victims he might subdue and make miserable, nothing could assuage the burning smart of this first humiliation. For many years, remembering this moment, he would bite his lips till the blood came, would tear his pillow with his teeth in the watches of the night. . . .

He fought back the tears which sheer frustrated anger had brought to his eyes—never for an instant imagining that the

smile on Maria's face might be no more than a mask, never for an instant understanding that she was seeking, not to hurt an over-sensitive boy, but rather to keep herself from betraying by any sigh the sense of the disaster and the ruin in which she found herself involved. . . . If only he would go away! If only she could be left alone!

It was only such a short while ago that he had been struck with amazement to feel that the famous Maria Cross was actually within his reach. Again and again he had said to himself, 'This simple little creature is Maria Cross!' He had only to stretch out his hand, and there she would be, inert, submissive to his will. He could take her when and how he chose, let her fall and then pull her to her feet again—and now, the movement of his outspread arms had sufficed to send her dizzily spinning out of reach. She was still there in the flesh, but he knew with a sure knowledge that from now on he could no more touch her than he could have touched a star. It was then that he realized how beautiful she was. Entirely occupied in thinking how to pluck and eat the fruit, without for a moment doubting that it was meant for him, he had never really looked at her. And now, all he could do was to devour her with his eyes.

She said, gently, for fear of irritating him, but with a terrible fixity of purpose: "I want to be alone. . . . Please listen to me, Raymond . . . you *must* leave me to myself. . . ." The doctor had suffered because he felt that Maria did not want to have him with her. Raymond knew an anguish still keener—the certainty which comes to us that the beloved object can no longer pretend, no longer hide the fact that it is the imperative need of her being not to see us any more, that she has rejected us and spewed us up. We realize, then, that our absence is necessary to her life, that she is on fire to forget us. She would hustle us from the room were it not that she is afraid we might resist.

She held out his hat, opened the door, flattened herself against the wall, while he, once more the adolescent youth, filled with horror of himself, wanted only to vanish, babbled idiotic excuses,

was paralysed with shame. But no sooner was he out on the road again, no sooner had the door closed behind him, than he found the words he should have thrown in the trollop's teeth. But it was too late! For years to come he was tortured by the thought that he had turned tail without so much as telling her what he thought of her.

While the boy, as he walked home, was voiding his heart of all the abuse with which he had been unable to smother Maria Cross, that young woman, having first closed the door and then the window, lay down. Somewhere beyond the trees a bird was uttering a fragmentary song that sounded like the broken mutterings of a man asleep. The suburban air echoed to the noise of trams and factory whistles. Drunken singing reached her from the Saturday streets. Yet, for all that, Maria Cross lay swaddled and stifled in silence—a silence that came not from without but from within, from the depths of her being, filling the empty room, invading the house, the garden, the city, the whole world. She lived at its airless centre, her eyes fixed on that inner flame which, though suddenly all fuel was lacking, burned inextinguishably. Whence, then, did it derive its sustenance? She was reminded how, sometimes, at the fag-end of her lonely evenings, a last flicker would sometimes start from the blackened ashes in the hearth where she had thought all life was dead. Eagerly she sought the loved face of the boy whom so often she had seen in the six o'clock tram, and could not find it. All that had reality for her was a little tousled hooligan, driven beside himself with shyness, forcing himself to overcome his own timidity—a vision as different from the real Raymond Courrèges as had ever been that idealized portrait which had given beauty to her love. Against him on whom she had bestowed the transfigured features of divinity she raged and fumed. 'Did I suffer the torments of hell and the ecstasies of heaven for a grubby little urchin like that? . . .' What she did not know was that it had been sufficient for her glance to fall upon this unformed boy for him to become

a man whose dishonesties many women were to know to their cost, submitting to him as lover and as bully. If it were true that she had *created* him by virtue of her love, it was no less true that by scorning him she had added the last finishing touch to her work. She had let loose upon the world a young man whose mania it would be to prove to himself that he was irresistible, even though a Maria Cross had successfully resisted him. From now on, in all the amorous intrigues of his future, there would always be an element of unexpressed antagonism, a longing to wound, to extract a cry of pain from the female lying helpless at his mercy. He was to cause many tears to flow on many nameless faces, and always they would be *her* tears. Doubtless he had been born with the instincts of a beast of prey, but, had it not been for Maria Cross, their violence might have been softened by some touch of weakness.

How fathomless her disgust for this "hooligan"! Yet, the inextinguishable flame burned on within her though there was nothing now for it to feed upon. No human being would ever have the benefit of all this light, all this warmth. Whither should she go? To the cemetery where François's body lay? No, no; far better to admit at once that the dead body of her son was nothing now to her but an alibi. She had been content in her visits to the child's grave only for the sake of the sweet homeward way which she had trodden with another, a living, child at her side. Hypocrite! What could she do, what say, before that tomb? She could but cast herself upon it as upon some door she could not open, a woman damned to all eternity. As well might she fall upon her knees in the dusty street. . . . Little François was no more than a handful of ashes, he who once had been so full of laughter and of tears. . . . Whom did she wish to have near her? The doctor?—*that* bore?—no, not a bore. But what availed all her striving to attain perfection since it was her destiny to set her hand to nothing that did not turn awry, no matter how excellent her intentions? Many had been the glorious goals on which she had set her heart, yet in each of

them only the worst part of herself had found its satisfaction. She wanted no one with her, nor yearned to find herself elsewhere than in this room with its torn curtains. Perhaps at Saint-Clair? Saint-Clair had seen her childhood. . . . She remembered the park into which she had crept as soon as the church-going family, so antagonistic to her mother, had gone away. Nature, it had seemed, was only waiting for their departure after the Easter holidays to break the coverings of all its shoots. The bracken grew high and rank, touching with formless, frothy green the lowest branches of the oaks. Only the pines swayed, unchanged, the same grey tops that seemed indifferent to the spring, and even for them a moment came when they, too, saw torn from their entrails the cloudy plenty of their pollen, the yellow immensity of their passion. At a turn in the path she would find, in those days, a broken doll, a handkerchief caught on a furze-bush. But to-day she was a stranger to that world. Nothing would greet her there but the sand on which so often she had lain face downward. . . .

When Justine came to tell her that dinner was ready, she tidied her hair and sat down before her steaming plate of soup. But because nothing must stand in the way of her maid's visit to the cinema with her husband, she was once again, half an hour later, alone at the drawing-room window. The fragrant lime had as yet no fragrance. Below her the rhododendrons already showed dark with coming colour. The fear of nothingness, the longing for a breathing-space, led her to seek some piece of wreckage to which she might cling. 'I yielded,' she thought, 'to that instinct for flight which comes over all of us when confronted by a human face made ugly by exigence and hunger. I convinced myself that the young brute and the young creature whom I once adored were different persons—but they were the same, the same child, only wearing a mask. As pregnant women wear a mask of fretfulness, so men, obsessed by love, have, too, close-moulded on their faces that look, so often hideous and always terrible, of the beast of prey that stirs within them. Galatea fled

from what frightened her yet lured her on. . . . I had dreamed of a long pilgrimage of kisses along which, making scarce noticeable progress, we should have passed from the regions of temperate warmth to those of enervating heat. But the young buck was too headstrong. Why did I not surrender to his fumbling urgency! In my raped and ravished body I might have found peace beyond imagining, something, perhaps, even better than peace. . . . Maybe, where human beings are concerned, there is no severing gulf that kisses will not bridge. . . . But kisses of what sort?' Remembering the rictus of his grin, she gave vent to an "Ugh!" of disgust. A whole gallery of pictures forced themselves into her mind. She saw Larousselle turning from her with a muttered growl, his face suffused: "What *is* it you want? . . . You're just a lump of wood, not flesh and blood at all!"

What, if it came to that, did she want? She wandered about the deserted room, sat for a while by the window, looking out, elbow on sill and head on hand, dreamed of some mysterious, unvisited land of silence where she might have felt her love, yet not demand of it speech or sound, though the beloved would have heard it, would have understood the nature of her desire even before desire was born. The touch of hands and lips implies between two persons a physical separation. But so deeply interfused would they have been one with the other, that no grip and clasp of limbs would have been necessary, that brief encounter so quickly loosed again by shame. Shame? She seemed to hear the laugh of Gaby Dubois, the light o' love, the words that once she had spoken: "Speak for yourself, my dear . . . *that's* the only consolation I've got in the bloody awful life I lead. . . ." Whence came this feeling of disgust? Did it really mean anything at all? Was it something positive and personal? A thousand formless thoughts woke in her mind and disappeared again, as, in the empty sky above her head, the shooting stars and falling, burned-out meteors.

'Is not my lot,' thought Maria, 'the common lot of all womankind?' Without husband, without children, no one, indeed, could be more lonely than herself. But was this solitude more actual or more intense than the sense of isolation from which no family life, however happy, could have saved her—the sense of being alone which comes to all of us as soon as we learn to recognize in ourselves the distinguishing marks of that accursed species, the race of lost souls whose instincts, needs and mysterious ends we alone can interpret? A truce to such exhausting analysis! Pale though the sky might be with traces of the lingering day, with the promise of a rising moon, beneath the still leaves darkness was massing. Leaning out into the night air, drawn, almost physically absorbed, by the quietness of the vegetable world, Maria Cross yielded not so much to a desire to drink deep of the branch-encumbered air as to a temptation to lose herself in it, to feel herself dissolved and atomized, till the inner desert of her heart should become one with the emptiness of space, till the silence within her should in no way differ from the silence of the spheres.

X

MEANWHILE, Raymond Courrèges, having, as he walked the road, emptied his mind of all its foul abuse, and inwardly raging that he had not turned the flood on Maria Cross, felt an urgent need to spatter her with still more mud. Obsessed by that craving, he longed, as soon as he got home, to see his father. The doctor, true to his expressed intention, had decided to spend the next forty-eight hours in bed, eating nothing and drinking only water—to the great satisfaction of his wife and mother. The onset of his false angina was not alone in determining him to act in this manner. He was curious to observe the effect upon his own constitution of such a regimen.

Robinson had already looked in to see him on the previous evening.

"I'd rather it had been Duluc," said Madame Courrèges, "but Robinson's better than nothing: after all he *is* a doctor, and knows all about testing the heart."

Robinson crept cautiously through the house, keeping close to the wall, and furtively climbed the stairs, dreading lest he find himself suddenly face to face with Madeleine, though they had never been actually engaged. The doctor, his eyes closed, his head feeling empty but his mind curiously lucid, his body free from pain beneath the light encumbrance of the sheets, and screened from the blaze of the sun, found no difficulty in following the tracks made by his thoughts. Here for a moment lost, there recovered, tangled and confused, they stretched before him, and his mind nosed its way along them as a dog might beat the bushes while his master walked, but did not shoot, amid the undergrowth. Without the slightest sense of fatigue he composed whole articles, to the last word, so that all that was left for him to do was to set them down on paper. Point by point he answered all the criticisms that had been provoked by the paper he had recently read to the Biological Society. His mother's presence was sweet to him—but so, also, was his wife's, and that was a matter to give him pause. Brought to a standstill at last, after an exhausting chase, he was ready to acquiesce now in Lucie's company. He noticed with appreciative wonder how careful his mother was to efface herself, and so avoid all risk of conflict. Without a shadow of mutual recrimination, the two women seemed content to share the prey, now that he had been torn for a few brief moments from his professional duties, from his private research and from a passion which, for them, remained anonymous. He did not put up a struggle, but appeared to take an interest in all that they said, however trivial. His world had suddenly contracted to the dimensions of their own. He actually wanted to know whether Julie was really leaving, or whether there was a chance that she might come to terms with

Madeleine's maid. The feel of a woman's hand upon his forehead, his mother's or his wife's, gave him back the sense of security which he had known in the days of his childhood's ailments. It rejoiced him to know that if he was to die, he would not die in solitude. It seemed to him that death in that room, with its familiar mahogany furniture, with his wife and his mother forcing themselves to smile, would be the most normal, the simplest, occurrence in all the world; for would not the bitter taste of his last moments be disguised by them as always, in the past, had been the nasty taste of medicine? . . . Just to slip away, wrapped in the warm folds of a lie, knowing himself a dupe. . . .

A flood of light invaded the room. Raymond came in, grumbling that he couldn't see a thing. He approached the man lying in the bed. In his presence alone he could relieve himself of all the vicious hatred that he felt for Maria Cross. Already he could taste in his mouth the sour flavour of what he was about to vomit forth. The sick man said: "Give me a kiss." A great warmth of feeling was in the eyes which he turned upon his son who, two evenings ago, among the vines, had wiped his face. But the young man, coming straight from the daylight into the darkened room, could not make out his father's features very distinctly. There was a harsh note in his voice as he put a question:

"D'you remember our talk about Maria Cross?"

"Yes, what of it?"

Raymond, leaning above the supine body, as though for an embrace or a murderous blow, saw beneath him two tormented eyes fixed upon his lips. He realized that someone else, besides himself, was suffering. 'I have known it,' he thought, 'ever since that evening when he called me a liar.' But he felt no jealousy. He was incapable of imagining his father in the rôle of lover: no, not jealousy, but a strange desire to cry, with which was mingled a sense of irritation and of mockery. The poor cheeks looked grey under the thinning beard, and there was a tightness in the voice that begged him to go on:

"Well, what is it you know? Don't keep me on tenterhooks: tell me!"

"I was misled, Papa: you are the only person who really knows Maria Cross. I just wanted to tell you that. Now try and get some sleep. How pale you look. Are you sure this diet is agreeing with you?"

It was with amazement that he heard his own voice saying the very reverse of what he had meant to say. He laid a hand upon the sad and arid brow—the same hand which Maria Cross had held such a short while before. The doctor found it cool, was afraid that it might be taken away.

"My opinion of Maria dates from far back. . . ."

At that moment, Madame Courrèges came back into the room. He put his finger to his lips, and Raymond noiselessly withdrew.

His mother was carrying a paraffin lamp (because in the doctor's weak state the electric light would have hurt his eyes). She put it on the table and lowered the shade. The restricted circle of illumination, the old-fashioned nature of its source, brought suddenly to light the mysterious world of rooms now vanished for ever, where a nightlight had been wont to struggle with a thick darkness full of furniture half drowned in obscurity. The doctor loved Maria, but he could see her with detachment. He loved her as the dead must love the living. She made one with all the other loves of his life, from boyhood on. . . . Feeling his way along the pathway of this thought, he now saw that one and the same sentiment had always held him in thrall down the years. It had always been like the one that had caused him the torment from which he had only just been released. He could feel his way back along the dreary sameness of that eternal pilgrimage, could have put a name to each one of all the passionate adventures most of which, like this one, had ended only in frustration. Yet, in those days he had been young. It wasn't, then, age alone that stood between him and Maria Cross. No more successfully at twenty-five than now could he have crossed

the desert separating this woman and himself. He remembered how, just after he had left college, when he was the same age as Raymond, he had loved, yet never known a moment's hope. . . . It was the law of his nature that he could never make contact with those he loved. He had never been more conscious of that truth than in those moments of partial success when he had held in his arms the object so long desired, and found it suddenly poor and dwarfed and utterly different from what it had been in the agonies of his desire. No reason to seek in the mirror the reasons for that solitude in which he was fated to remain until his death. Other men—his father had been one such, Raymond would be another—can follow the law of their being into old age, obedient to the demands of their vocation of love. But he, even in his youth, had been obedient only to the call of his predestined solitude.

The ladies having gone downstairs to dinner, he heard a sound that came straight out of his childhood, the tinkle of spoons on china. But closer to his ears and to his heart were the noises made by rustling leaves, by the crickets, by a frog pleased at the coming of the rain. Then the ladies returned. They said:

"You must be feeling very weak."

"I certainly couldn't stand upright."

But because this diet of his was a form of "treatment" they were pleased that he felt weak.

"Wouldn't you like a little . . .?"

The sense of weakness helped him on his way of exploration into the distant past. The two ladies were carrying on a conversation in undertones. The doctor heard a name mentioned, and questioned them:

"Wasn't that a certain Mademoiselle Malichecq?"

"So you heard what we were saying? I thought you were asleep. No, it's her sister-in-law who's a Malichecq. . . . She's a Martin."

The doctor had gone to sleep by the time the Basques put in

an appearance, and did not open his eyes until he heard the doors of their rooms shut. Then his mother rolled up her knitting, rose heavily from her chair, and kissed him on the forehead, the eyes and the neck.

"Your skin's quite cool," she said.

He was alone with Madame Courrèges, who at once embarked upon a grievance:

"Raymond took the last tram into Bordeaux again. God knows what time he'll come in. He looked terrible this evening; I felt quite frightened. When he's spent the money you gave him, he'll run into debt, if he hasn't started already!"

In a low voice the doctor said: "Our little Raymond . . . nineteen already," and shuddered, thinking of certain streets in Bordeaux that were always deserted after dark. He remembered the sailor over whose body he had tripped one evening. The man's face and chest had been blotched with stains of wine and blood. . . . Somebody was still moving about upstairs. A dog in the stable yard started to bark furiously. Madame Courrèges listened intently:

"I can hear somebody moving about. It can't be Raymond as early as this. Besides, if it were, the dog wouldn't be making all that noise."

Somebody was coming towards the house. There was nothing furtive about his movements, indeed, he seemed to be going out of his way to avoid concealment. The shutters of the French window were shaken. Madame Courrèges leaned forward.

"Who's there?"

"An urgent message for the doctor."

"The doctor doesn't go out at night: you ought to know that by this time. Try Doctor Larue in the village."

The man, who was holding a lantern in his hand, was insistent. The doctor, who was still half asleep, cried out to his wife:

"Tell him it's useless. I didn't come to live in the country just in order to be pulled out of bed by night calls."

"It's out of the question. My husband only sees patients by appointment. He has an arrangement with Doctor Larue . . ."

"But, Madame, it's about one of his patients that I've come, a neighbour of his. . . . He'll come soon enough when he hears the name. It's Madame Cross, Madame Maria Cross. She's had a fall—on her head."

"Maria Cross? Why should you think he'd put himself out for her more than for anybody else?"

But at sound of the name the doctor had got out of bed. He elbowed his wife aside and leaned out of the window.

"Is that you, Maraud? I didn't recognize your voice. What has happened to your mistress?"

"She's had a fall, sir, on her head. She's delirious and asking for the doctor."

"I'll be with you in five minutes; just give me time to get something on."

He shut the window and started looking for his clothes.

"You're not really going?"

He made no reply but muttered to himself: "Where are my socks?" His wife protested. Hadn't he just said he wouldn't be disturbed at night for anybody? Why this sudden change of mind? He could scarcely stand up: he would faint from sheer weakness.

"It's one of my patients. Surely you see that I can't *not* go?"

There was sarcasm in her voice as she answered:

"Oh yes, I see right enough. . . . It has taken me some time, but I see now."

She did not yet actually suspect her husband. For the moment she was intent only on wounding him. He, confident in his detachment, in the fact of his renunciation, had no qualms on her account. After the long torment of his passion, nothing, he felt, could be less blameworthy, less guilty than his feeling now of friendly alarm. It never occurred to him that though he might, his wife could not, draw a comparison between the past and present states of his love for Maria Cross. Two months earlier

he would not have dared to show his anxiety so openly. When passion is a flaming fire we instinctively dissimulate. But once we have given up all hope of happiness, once we have accepted an eternal hunger, an eternal thirst, the least we can do—or so we think—is not to wear ourselves out with pretending.

"My poor Lucie, you're quite wrong. All that is very far away now . . . quite, quite finished. Yes, I *am* deeply attached to the poor creature . . . but that has nothing to do . . ."

He leaned against the bed, murmuring: "She's right; I've eaten nothing," and proceeded to ask his wife to make him some chocolate on the spirit lamp.

"Where d'you think I'm going to find milk at this time of night? I don't suppose there's a scrap of bread in the kitchen, either. But no doubt, when you've seen to this—this woman, she'll make you a nice little supper. It will be well worth while having been disturbed for that!"

"What a fool you are, my dear. If only you knew . . ."

She took his hand and came close:

"You said—all that's quite finished . . . all that's very far away—then there *was* something between you? What was it? I have a right to know. I won't reproach you, but I want to know."

The doctor felt so breathless that he had to make two attempts before he could get his boots on. He muttered:

"I was speaking generally: what I said had nothing to do with Maria Cross. Look at me, Lucie . . ."

But she was busy going over in her mind the events of the past months. She had the key to it all now! Everything hung together: everything was as clear as clear. . . .

"Paul, don't go to that woman. I've never bothered you with questions . . . you must do me the justice to admit that."

He answered gently that it was not in his power to do what she asked. His duty was to his patient—she might be dying: a fall on the head might well prove fatal.

"If you keep me from going out, you will be responsible for her death!"

She loosed him, finding no more to say. As he moved away from her she began speaking to herself, stumbling over her words: "It may be all a trick . . . they may have fixed it up between them." Then she remembered that the doctor had had nothing to eat since the previous evening. Seated on a chair, she listened to the murmur of voices in the garden.

"Yes, she fell out of the window . . . it must have been an accident. She wouldn't have chosen the drawing-room one, which is on the ground floor, if she had meant to throw herself out. Quite delirious . . . complaining about her head . . . doesn't remember a thing."

Madame Courrèges heard her husband tell the man to get some ice in the village: he would find some at the inn or at the butcher's. He must get some bromide, too, at the chemist's.

"I'll go by the Bois de Berge: it'll be quicker that way than if I had the horse put in."

"You won't want the lantern, sir: it's as bright as day with this moon."

The doctor had only just passed through the small gate leading to the stable-yard when he heard someone running after him. A voice panted out his Christian name. He saw that it was his wife, in her dressing-gown, with her hair in plaits, ready for bed. She was too breathless to say more, but held out to him a piece of stale bread and a large bar of chocolate.

He went through the Bois de Berge. The clearings were stained with moonlight, though the full strength of the white radiance could not penetrate the leaves. But the great planet sat in throned majesty above the road, shining as though in a river bed cut for its brightness. The bread and chocolate recalled the taste of all his schoolboy snacks—the taste of happiness—at dawn, when he used to go out shooting, in the days when his feet were soaked with dew and he was seventeen. Numbed by the shock of the news, he only now began to feel the pain. Suppose Maria Cross were going to die? Who was it that had

made her want to die? But had she wanted it? She could remember nothing. How completely knocked-out are those victims of shock who never remember anything, who smother up in darkness the essential moment of their destiny! But he mustn't question her. The important thing for the time being was that she should work her brain as little as possible. 'Remember, you are only a doctor attending his patient. There can be no question of suicide. When people have made up their minds to die, they don't choose a ground-floor window. She doesn't take drugs, or not as far as I know, though it's true that there was a smell of ether in her room one evening when I was there; but she'd been suffering from headache. . . .'

Beyond the area of his stifling torment, on the very edge of his consciousness, another storm was growling. When the appointed moment came, it would burst. 'Poor Lucie—jealous! what a wretched business . . . but time enough to think about that later. . . . Here I am. The moon makes the garden look like a stage scene. It's as puerile as a setting for *Werther*. . . . No sound of raised voices.' The main door was ajar. From sheer habit he went straight to the empty drawing-room, then turned and climbed the stairs. Justine opened the door of the bedroom. He went across to the bed, on which Maria was lying, moaning to herself, and trying to push away the compress from her forehead. He had no eyes for her body beneath the close-clinging sheet, the body which so often he had undressed in imagination. He had no eyes for her disordered hair, nor for her arm, naked to the armpit. All that mattered was that she recognized him, that her delirium was only intermittent. She kept on saying: "What happened, doctor?—what was it?" He made a mental note: amnesia. Leaning over the naked breast whose veiled loveliness had once made him tremble, he listened to her heart, then, very gently touching her injured forehead with his finger, he traced the extent of the wound. "Does it hurt you here . . . or here . . . or here?" She complained, too, of pain in her hip. Very carefully he drew down the sheet so as to expose no more than the small

bruised surface; then covered it up again. With his eyes on his watch, he felt her pulse. This body had been delivered to him for cure, not for possession. His eyes knew that they were there to observe, not to be enchanted. He gazed intently at her flesh, bringing all his intelligence to bear. The clearness of his mind barred all roads of approach to his melancholy passion.

"I'm in pain," she moaned; "I'm in such dreadful pain."

She pushed away the compress, then asked for a fresh one which the maid proceeded to soak in the kettle. The chauffeur came in with a bucket of ice, but when the doctor tried to apply it to her head, she pushed away the rubber skull-cap and, in commanding tones, insisted on a *hot* compress. To the doctor she exclaimed: "Don't be so slow: it takes you an hour to carry out my orders!"

He was extremely interested in these symptoms, which were similar to others he had noticed in cases of shock. The body lying there before him, which once had been the carnal source of all his dreams and reveries and delight, roused in him nothing but an intense curiosity, a concentrated and enhanced attention. The patient's mind was no longer wandering, but she poured forth a spate of words. He noticed with surprise that she, whose powers of speech were normally so defective that she had to make an effort, and not always a successful effort, to find the right words for what she wanted to express, had suddenly become almost eloquent. She had complete command of her vocabulary, and seemed capable of calling on technical terms at will. 'What a mysterious organ,' he reflected, 'is the human brain. How extraordinary it is that it can develop its scope in this amazing way merely as the result of shock.'

"I never meant to kill myself—you must believe that, doctor. I absolutely forbid you to think that such an idea ever came into my mind. I can remember nothing. The only certain thing is that what I wanted was not to die but to sleep. I've never truly longed for anything in my life but peace and quiet. If ever you hear anybody boasting that he dragged me down to the point of

making me want to kill myself, I tell you you mustn't believe it. Do you understand me? I pro-hi-bit anything of the sort."

"Yes, dear lady. I swear to you that nobody has ever uttered such a boast in my hearing . . . Now, just sit up and drink this. It's only bromide: it will soothe your nerves."

"I don't need soothing. I am in a good deal of pain, but I am perfectly calm. Move the lamp further away. There now, I've messed the sheets. But I don't care—I'll empty the drug all over the bed if I want to. . . ."

When he asked whether the pain was less acute, she replied that it was excruciating, but that it didn't come only from her injury. In an access of talkativeness she once more raised her voice and spoke in such an unbroken flow that Justine observed that Madame was "talking like a book." The doctor told the woman to go and get some sleep. He would sit up with the patient, he said, until daybreak.

"What other way out is there, doctor, except sleep? I see everything so clearly now. I understand what I never understood before . . . the people we think we love . . . the passions that end so miserably . . . now, at last, I know the truth. . . ." (The compress had grown cold and she pushed it away with her hand. The damp hair clung to her forehead as though she were sweating.) "No, not passions, but one single passion. It goes on inside us, and from a casual meeting, from the eyes and lips of some perfect stranger, we build up something that we think corresponds with it. . . . Only by physical contact, by the embraces of the flesh, by, in short, the sexual act, can two persons ever really communicate. . . . But we know only too well where that road leads, and why it was traced—for the sole purpose of continuing the species, as you would put it, doctor. We choose the one path open to us, but it was never designed to lead us to our hearts' desire."

At first he had lent but half an ear to this outburst. He made no attempt to understand what she was saying. What interested him was her irrelevant talkativeness. It was, he noticed, as though

the physical disturbance she had suffered had sufficed partially to bring into the open ideas that had been lying repressed in her mind.

"One's got to love the pleasure of the body, doctor. Gaby used to say—it's the only thing in the world, darling, that has never disappointed me—but, unfortunately we can't, all of us, do that. And yet it *is* the only thing that makes us forget the object of our search, forget so far that it actually becomes that object. Stupefy yourself . . . that's easier said than done."

How curious it was, thought the doctor, that she should speak of sexual pleasure precisely as Pascal had spoken of faith. In order to quieten her at all costs so that she might get some sleep, he held out some syrup in a spoon. But she pushed it away, and once again made a stain upon the sheets.

"No, I don't *want* any bromide. I shall empty it all over the bed if I like: *you* can't prevent me!"

Without the slightest subtlety of transition she went on: "Always between me and those I have longed to possess there has stretched this fetid region of swamp and mud. But they didn't understand. . . . They always thought I was calling to them because I wanted to wallow in the dirt."

Her lips moved, and the doctor thought that she was muttering names, Christian names. He leaned over her eagerly, but did not hear the one name which would utterly have destroyed his peace of mind. For a few moments he forgot that she was his patient and saw only a woman who was lying to him. In an agony of misery he murmured:

"You're just like all the others. You want one thing, and one thing only, pleasure. . . . It's the same with all of us. It's the only thing we want."

She raised her lovely arms, hid her face, uttered a long-drawn moan. In a low voice he said: "What's the matter with me? I must be mad!" He renewed the compress, poured some more syrup into a spoon, and supported the sufferer's head. Maria at last consented to drink: then, after a moment's silence:

"Yes, I too, I too. You know, doctor, how sometimes one sees the lightning and hears the thunder simultaneously—well, with me pleasure and disgust are all confused, just like the lightning and the thunder: they strike me at the same moment. There is no interval between the pleasure and the disgust."

She grew calmer and stopped speaking. The doctor sat down in an armchair and watched beside her, his mind a confusion of thoughts. He believed that she was asleep, but suddenly her voice, dreamy now and at peace, rose again:

"Someone with whom we might make contact, someone we might possess—but not in the flesh—by whom we might be possessed. . . ."

Fumblingly she pushed the damp cloth from her brow. The room was filled with the silence of the dying night. It was the hour of the deepest sleep, the hour at which the constellations change their pattern in the sky so that we no longer recognize them.

Her pulse was calm. She was sleeping like a child whose breathing is so light that one gets up to make sure that it is still alive. The blood had once more mounted to her cheeks and gave them colour. Her body was no longer that of a sufferer: not now did pain divorce her from desire. How long must his poor tormented flesh keep watch beside this other flesh deadened at last to suffering? 'The body has its agony,' thought the doctor. 'To the simple, Paradise lies wide open. . . . Who was it said that love was the pleasure of the poor? I might have been the man who, his day's work ended, lay down each night beside this woman. But then, she would not have been *this* woman. . . She would have been a mother more than once. All her body would bear signs of the purpose it had served, the traces of a life spent in degrading tasks. . . . Desire would be dead: nothing would remain but a few grubby habits. . . . Dawn already! How long the servant is in coming!'

He was afraid that he would never be able to walk as far as his house. He told himself that it was hunger made him weak, but

dreaded the treachery of his heart whose beats he could so clearly hear. Physical anguish had freed him from from love's sickness. But already, though no sign came to warn him, the destiny of Maria Cross was imperceptibly drifting away from his own. . . . The mooring ropes are loosed, the anchor raised: the vessel moves, but as yet one does not realize that it is moving, though in another hour it will be no more than a dark stain upon the sea. He had often observed that life takes no heed of preparations. Ever since the days of his youth, the objects of his affection had, almost all of them, disappeared with dramatic suddenness, carried away by some other passion, or, with less fuss and bother, had just packed up and left town. Nothing more was ever heard of them. It is not death that tears from us those we love; rather, it keeps them safe, preserving them in all the adorable ambiance of youth. Death is the salt of love: it is life that brings corruption. To-morrow the doctor would be stretched upon a sick bed, with his wife sitting beside him. Robinson would be keeping a watchful eye on Maria Cross's convalescence, and would send her to Luchon to take the waters, because his best friend had set up in practice there, and he wanted to help him with a few patients. In the autumn, Monsieur Larousselle, whose business often took him to Paris, would decide to rent a flat close to the Bois, and would suggest to Maria that she move there, because, by that time, she would have said that she would rather die than go back to the house at Talence, with its worn carpets and torn curtains, or put up any longer with the insults of the Bordeaux folk.

When the maid came into the room, even had the doctor not felt so weak that he seemed to be conscious of nothing but his weakness—even had he been full of life and vigour, no inner voice would have warned him to take his last long look at the sleeping Maria Cross. He was fated never to enter this house again, yet all he said to the maid was: "I'll look in again this evening. . . . Give her another spoonful of bromide if she seems restless." He stumbled from the room, holding to the furniture

to keep himself from falling. It was the only time in his life that he had left Maria Cross without turning his head.

He hoped that the early morning air would sting his blood to activity, but he had to stop at the bottom of the steps. His teeth were chattering. So often in the past, when hastening to his love, he had crossed the garden in a few seconds, but now, as he looked at the distant gate, he wondered whether he would have strength enough to reach it. He dragged himself through the mist and was tempted to turn back. He would never be able to walk as far as the church, where, perhaps, he might find somebody to help him. Here was the gate at last, and, beyond the railings, a carriage—his carriage. Through the window he could see the face of Lucie Courrèges. She was sitting there quite motionless and as though dead. He opened the door, collapsed against his wife, leaned his head on her shoulder, and lost consciousness.

"Don't agitate yourself. Robinson has everything under control in the laboratory, and is looking after your patients. At this very moment he is at Talence, you know where. . . . Now don't talk."

From the depths of his lassitude he noticed the ladies' anxiety, heard their whispering outside his door. He believed that he was seriously ill, and attached no importance to what they said: "Just a touch of influenza, but in your anæmic state that's quite bad enough." He asked to see Raymond, but Raymond was always out. "He came in while you were asleep, but didn't like to wake you." As a matter of fact, for the last three days Lieutenant Basque had been in Bordeaux hunting everywhere for the boy. They had taken no one into their confidence but a private enquiry agent. "Whatever happens, he must never know. . . ."

At the end of six days Raymond suddenly appeared in the dining-room while they were at dinner. His face looked thin and tanned by exposure. There was a bruise under his right eye

where somebody had hit him. He ate as though he were famished, and even the little girls did not dare to question him. He asked his grandmother where his father was.

"He's got a touch of influenza . . . it's nothing, but we were rather worried because of the state of his heart. Robinson says that he mustn't be left alone. Your mother and I take turns at sitting with him."

Raymond said that to-night he would relieve them, and, when Basque ventured to remark, "You'd much better go to bed: if you could only see what you look like! . . ." he declared that he wasn't the slightest bit tired, and that he had been sleeping very well all the time he was away:

"There's no shortage of beds in Bordeaux."

The tone in which he made the remark made Basque lower his eyes. Later, when the doctor opened his, he saw Raymond standing beside him. He made a sign for him to come closer, and, when he did so, murmured: "You reek of cheap scent . . . I don't need anything: go to bed." But towards midnight he was roused by the sound of Raymond walking up and down. The boy had opened the window and was leaning out into the darkness. "It's stifling to-night," he grumbled. Some moths flew in. Raymond took off his jacket, waistcoat and collar. Then he sat down in an armchair. A few seconds later the doctor heard his regular breathing. When day came, the sick man woke before his watcher and gazed in amazement at the child sitting there, his head drooping, seemingly without life, as though sleep had killed him. The sleeve of his shirt was torn, and revealed a muscular arm that was the colour of a cigar. It was tattooed with the sort of obscene design favoured by sailors. The congested patch beneath his eye had obviously been caused by a fist. But there were other scars on his neck, on his shoulder and on his chest, scars that had the form of a human mouth.

XI

THE revolving door of the little bar never remained still for a moment. The circle of tables pressed closer and closer on the dancing couples, beneath whose feet the leather floor-covering, like the wild-ass's skin, continually shrank. In the contracted space the dances were no more than vertical jerkings. The women sat jammed together on the settees and laughed when they noticed on bare arms the mark of an involuntary caress. The one called Gladys and her companion put on their fur coats.

"You staying?"

Larousselle protested that they were leaving just as things might get amusing. With his hands thrust into his pockets, unsteady on his feet, and his paunch sticking out provocatively, he went across and perched himself on a high stool. The barman burst out laughing, as did the young men to whom he was explaining with considerable pride the ingredients of a special aphrodisiac cocktail of his own invention. Maria, alone at her table, took another sip of champagne and put down her glass. She smiled vaguely, utterly indifferent to Raymond's proximity. What passion might occupy her mind he could not know. She was armed against him, separated from him, by the accumulated experiences of seventeen years. Like a dazed and blinded diver he fought his way to the surface, up from the dead past. But the only thing in the unclear backward of time that really belonged wholly to him was a narrow path, quickly traversed, between walls of clotted darkness. With his nose to the ground he had followed the scent, oblivious to all others that might cross it. But this was no place for dreaming. Across the smoky room and the crowd of dancing couples Maria gave him a hasty glance, then turned away. Why had he not even smiled at her? He dreaded to think that after all these years the youth that once he had been

might again take visionary form in this woman's eyes, that image of the shy young boy in the grip of an impotent and furtive desire. Courrèges, notorious for his audacities, trembled with anxiety this evening lest, at any moment now, Maria might get up and disappear. Wasn't there anything he could try? He was the victim of that fatality which condemns us to play the rôle of a man in whom a woman makes exclusive, unalterable, choice of certain elements, for ever ignoring those others that may, too, be part of him. There is nothing to be done against this particular chemical law. Every human being with whom we come in contact isolates in us a single property, always the same, which, as a rule, we should prefer to keep concealed. Our misery, on these occasions, consists in our seeing the loved one build up, beneath our very eyes, the portrait of us that she has made, reduce to nothing our most precious virtues, and turn the light full on our one weakness, absurdity or vice. And not only that. We are forced to share in the vision, to conform to it, for just so long as those appraising eyes, with their single, fixed idea, are bent on us. Only to others, whose affection is of no value to us, will our virtues glow, our talents shine, our strength seem superhuman, our face become as the face of a god.

Now that he had become, under Maria Cross's gaze, once more an abashed and foolish youth, Courrèges no longer wanted to revenge himself. His humble desire went no further than that this woman might learn the details of his amorous career, of all the victories he had won from that moment when, shortly after he had been thrown out of the house at Talence, he had been taken up, almost kidnapped, by an American woman who had kept him for six months at the Ritz (his family believed that he was in Paris working for his exam.). But it was just that, he told himself, that was so impossible—to show himself as someone totally different from what he had been in that over-furnished drawing-room, all "luxury and squalor," when she had said, averting her face, "I want to be alone, Raymond—listen to me —you *must* leave me to myself."

It was the hour at which the tide begins to ebb. But those regular patrons of the little bar who left their troubles with their coats in the cloak-room stayed on. A young woman in red was whirling round ecstatically, her arms extended like wings, while her partner held her by the waist—two happy mayflies united in full flight. An American showed the smooth face of a schoolboy above a pair of enormous shoulders. With ears only for the voice of some god within him, he danced alone, improvising steps which were probably obscene. To the applause which greeted his efforts he responded awkwardly with the grin of a happy child.

Victor Larousselle had resumed his seat opposite Maria. Now and again he turned his head and stared at Raymond. His large face, of a uniform alcoholic red (except under the eyes, where there were livid pouches), had the look of a man eager for a sign of recognition. In vain did Maria beg him to turn his attention elsewhere. If there was one thing above all others about Paris that Larousselle could not bear, it was seeing so many strange faces. At home there was scarcely one that did not immediately bring to mind some name, some married relationship, someone whom he could immediately "place" whether publicly, as a person demanding social acknowledgment, or surreptitiously, as a member of the half-world whom he might know but could not openly greet. Nothing is commoner than that memory for faces which historians attribute only to the great. Larousselle remembered Raymond perfectly well from having seen him driving with his father in the old days, and from having occasionally patted his head. At Bordeaux, in the Cours de l'Intendance, he would have made no sign of recognition, but here, apart from the fact that he could never get used to the humiliation of passing for ever unnoticed, he was secretly anxious that Maria should not be left alone while he played the fool with the two Russian girls who were so obviously wearing nothing under their frocks. Raymond, acutely conscious of Maria's every gesture, concluded that she was doing her best to

prevent Larousselle from speaking to him. He was convinced that, even after the lapse of seventeen years, she still saw him as an uncouth and furtive oaf. He heard the man from Bordeaux snarl: "Well, I *want* to, and that ought to be enough for you!" A smile lay like a mask on his unpleasant countenance as he picked his way towards Raymond with all the self-confidence of a man who believes his handshake to be a privilege. Surely, he *couldn't* be mistaken? he said. It was, wasn't it, the son of that excellent doctor Courrèges? His wife remembered quite clearly that she had known him at the time when the doctor was attending her. . . . He was completely master of the situation, took the young man's glass, and made him sit down beside Maria, who held out her hand, and then, almost immediately, withdrew it. Larousselle, after sitting down for a few moments, jumped up again and said without the slightest show of embarrassment:

"Forgive me, will you?—back in a minute."

He joined the two young Russian women at the bar. Though it might be only a matter of moments before he would be back again, and though nothing seemed to Raymond more important than to turn this short respite to the best advantage, he remained silent. Maria turned away her head. He could smell the fragrance of her short hair, and noticed with deep emotion, that a few of the strands were white. A few?—thousands perhaps! The strongly marked, rather thick, lips seemed miraculously untouched by age, and still gave him the impression of fruit ripe for the picking. In them was concentrated all the sensuality of her body. The light in her eyes, under the wide, exposed brow, was astonishingly pure. What did it matter if the storms of time had beaten against, had slowly eaten away and relaxed, the lines of neck and throat?

Without looking at him, she said:

"My husband is really very indiscreet. . . ."

Raymond, as sheepish now as he could ever have been at eighteen, betrayed his amazement at the news that she was married.

"D'you mean to say you didn't know? It's common knowledge in Bordeaux."

She had made up her mind to maintain an icy silence, but seemed astounded to find that there was anybody in the world—least of all a man from Bordeaux—who was ignorant of the fact that she was now Madame Victor Larousselle. He explained that it was many years since he had lived in that city. At that she could no longer keep from breaking her vow of silence. Monsieur Larousselle, she said, had made up his mind the year after the war . . . he had waited until then because of his son.

"Actually, it was Bertrand who begged us, almost before he was out of the army, to get the whole thing settled. It didn't matter to me one way or the other. . . . I agreed from the highest motives only."

She added that she would have preferred to go on living in Bordeaux:

"But Bertrand is at the Polytechnic. Besides, Monsieur Larousselle has to be in Paris for a fortnight every month, so we thought it better to make a home there for the boy."

She seemed suddenly overcome by shyness at having spoken like this, at having confided in him. Once again remote, she said:

"And the dear doctor? Life has a way of separating us from our best friends. . . ."

How delightful it would be to see him again! But when Raymond, taking her at her word, replied: "As a matter of fact, my father is in Paris at this very moment, at the Grand Hotel. He would be more than pleased . . ." she stopped short, and appeared not to have heard him.

Eager to touch her on the raw, to rouse her to a show of anger, he took his courage in both hands and proceeded to voice his one burning preoccupation:

"You don't still hold my boorishness against me? I was only a clumsy child in those days, and really very innocent. Tell me you don't bear me a grudge . . ."

"Bear a grudge?"

She pretended not to understand. Then:

"Oh, you're referring to that ridiculous scene . . . really, there's nothing to forgive. I think I must have been slightly mad myself. Fancy taking a little boy like you seriously! It all seems to me so entirely unimportant now . . . so very, very far away."

He certainly had touched her on the raw, though not in the way he had expected. She had a horror of all that reminded her of the old Maria Cross, but the adventure in which Raymond had played a part she looked on as merely ridiculous. Suddenly grown cautious, she found herself wondering whether he had ever known that she had tried to kill herself. No, for if he had he would have been prouder, would have seemed less humble.

As for Raymond, he had discounted everything in advance—everything except this worst of all foreseeable possibilities, her complete indifference.

"In those days I lived in a world of my own, and read the infinite into all sorts of nonsensical trifles. It is as though you were talking to me of some perfectly strange woman."

He knew that anger and hatred are but extensions of love, that if he could have roused them in Maria Cross his cause would not have been entirely hopeless. But the only effect his words had had upon this woman was to irritate her, to make her feel ashamed at the thought that once she had been caught out with such a wretched trick and in such paltry company.

"So you actually thought," she went on, "that a piece of silliness like that could mean something to me?"

He muttered that it had certainly meant something to him—an admission that he had never before made to himself, but now, at last, scarcely knowing what he said, put into words. He had no idea that the whole pattern of his life had been changed by that one squalid incident of his youth. He was caught in an uprush of suffering. He heard Maria's calm, detached voice:

"How right Bertrand is to say that we don't really begin to live until we've reached twenty-five or thirty."

He had a confused feeling that the remark was not true; that by the time we are beginning to grow up the future is wholly formed in us. On the threshold of manhood the bets have already been placed; nothing more can be staked. Inclinations planted in our flesh even before birth are inextricably confused with the innocence of our early years, but only when we have reached man's estate do they suddenly put forth their monstrous flowers.

Completely at sea, fighting his losing battle against this inaccessible woman, he remembered now what it was that he had so longed to tell Maria, and even though he realized increasingly as he spoke that his words were about as ill-timed as they possibly could be, declared that "our little adventure certainly hasn't stood in the way of my learning about love." Oh, very far from it! He was quite sure that he had had more women than any young man of his age—and women who had something to them, not just your common-or-garden tarts. . . . In that respect she had brought him luck.

She leaned back and, through half-closed eyes, looked at him with an expression of disgust. What, then, she asked, was he complaining of?

"Since, I presume, that sort of filth is the only thing you care about."

She lit a cigarette, leaned her cropped neck against the wall, and watched, through the smoke, the gyrations of three couples. When the jazz-players paused for breath the men detached themselves from their partners, clapped their hands, and then stretched them towards the negro instrumentalists in a gesture of supplication—as though their very lives depended upon a renewal of the din. The coloured gentlemen, moved by compassion, resumed their playing, and the mayflies, born aloft on the rhythm, clasped one another in a fresh embrace and once again took wing. But Raymond, with hatred in his heart, looked at this woman with the short hair and the cigarette, who was none

other than Maria Cross. He searched for the one word that would shake her self-control, and at last he found it.

"Well, anyhow, you're —— here."

She realized that what he meant was—we always return to our first loves. He had the satisfaction of seeing her cheeks flush to a deep red, her brows draw together in a harsh frown.

"I have always loathed places like this. To say that sort of thing shows how little you know me! Your father, I am sure, remembers the agonies I went through when Monsieur Larousselle used to drag me off to the *Lion Rouge*. It wouldn't be of the slightest use my telling you that the only thing that brings me here is a sense of duty—yes, of duty. . . . But what can a man like you know of my scruples? It was Bertrand himself who advised me to yield—within reason—to my husband's tastes. If I am to retain any influence, I mustn't ride him on too tight a rein. Bertrand is very broadminded. He begged me not to resist his father's wish that I should cut my hair. . . ."

She had mentioned Bertrand's name merely in order to lessen her nervous tension, to feel at peace and mollified. By the light of memory, Raymond saw once again a deserted path in the Public Park in Bordeaux. The time was four o'clock. He could hear the panting of a small boy running after him, the sound of a tear-thickened voice: "Give me back my notebook." What sort of a man had that delicate youth become? Intent on wounding, he said:

"So you've got a grown-up son now?"

But she wasn't wounded at all; she smiled happily:

"Of course, you knew him at school. . . "

Raymond suddenly took on for her a real existence. He had been one of Bertrand's school-fellows.

"Yes, a grown-up son, but a son who can be at once a friend and a master. You cannot imagine how much I owe to him. . . ."

"You told me—your marriage."

"Oh *that*! . . . my marriage is the least of my debts. You see, he has revealed—but it's no good, you wouldn't understand. It

was only that I was thinking how you'd known him at school. I'd so much like to have some idea of what he was like as a little boy. I've often asked my husband about him, but it's extraordinary how little a man can tell one about his son's childhood: 'A nice little chap, just like all the others'—that's as much as he can say. I've no reason to believe that you were any more observant. In the first place, you were much older than he was."

"Four years—that's nothing," Raymond muttered, and added: "I remember that he had a face like a girl."

She showed no sign of anger, but answered with quiet contempt that of course they could not have had much in common. Raymond realized that in the eyes of Maria Cross her stepson floated in an airy world far above his head. She was thinking of Bertrand: she had been drinking champagne; there was a rapturous smile upon her lips. Like the disunited mayflies, she, too, clapped her hands eager for the music to renew its spell about her. What remained in Raymond's memory of the women he had possessed? Some of them he would scarcely have recognized. But hardly a day had passed during the last seventeen years that he had not conjured up in his mind, had not insulted and caressed, the face which to-night he could see in profile close beside him. He could not endure that she should be so far from him in spirit. At all costs he must bridge the gap, and to that end he took the conversation back to Bertrand.

"I suppose he'll be leaving college very soon now?"

She replied with a show of polite interest that he was in his last year. He had lost four years because of the war. She hoped that he would pass out very high, and when Raymond remarked that no doubt Bertrand would follow in his father's footsteps, said, with some animation, that he must be given time in which to make up his mind. She was quite sure, she added, that he would make his influence felt no matter what profession he adopted. Raymond could not make out in what way he was so remarkable.

"The effect he has on his fellow-students is quite extra-

ordinary. . . . But I don't know why I am telling you all this. . . ."

She gave the impression that she was coming down to earth, coming down a long way, when she asked:

"And what about you. What do *you* do?"

"Oh, I just potter about, in the business world, you know."

It was suddenly borne in on him what a wretched mess he had made of his life. But she was barely listening. It wasn't that she despised him—that, in its way, would have been something definite, but that for her he simply did not exist. She half rose from her chair and made signs to Larousselle who was still holding forth from his stool. "Just a few more minutes!" he called back. In a low voice she said, "How red he looks—he's drinking too much."

The negro musicians were packing up their instruments with as much care as though they had been sleeping children. Only the piano seemed incapable of stopping. A single couple was revolving on the floor. The other dancers, their arms still intertwined, had collapsed on to seats. This was the moment of the evening which Raymond Courrèges had so often sipped and savoured, the moment when claws are retracted, when eyes become veiled by a sudden softness, when voices sink to a whisper and hands become insidiously inviting. . . . There had been a time when, at such moments, he had smiled to himself, thinking of what was to come later, of men walking homeward in the early dawn, whistling to themselves and leaving behind, in the secrecy of some anonymous bedroom, a jaded body sprawled across a bed, so still, so spent, that it might have been that of a murdered woman. . . Not thus would he have left the body of Maria Cross! A whole life-time would have been all too short to satisfy his ravenous hunger.

So completely indifferent was she to his presence that she did not even notice how he had moved his leg closer to her own, did not even feel the contact. He had no power whatever over her. And yet in those distant years he had been hers for the taking.

She had thought she loved him—and he had never known. He had been an inexperienced boy. She should have explained what it was she wanted of him. No whim, however extravagant, would have rebuffed him. He would have proceeded as slowly as she wished. He could, at need, make smooth and easy the voyage of pleasure . . . it would have brought her joy. But now it was too late. Centuries might pass before their ways should cross again in the six o'clock tram. . . . He looked up and saw in a mirror the wreckage of his youth, the first sure signs of creeping age. Gone were the days when women might have loved him. Now it was for him to take the initiative, if, indeed, he were still worthy of love.

He laid his hand on hers:

"Do you remember the tram?"

She shrugged her shoulders, and, without so much as turning her head, had the effrontery to ask:

"What tram?"

Then, before he could reply, she hurried on:

"I wonder whether you would be so very kind as to bring Monsieur Larousselle over here and get his coat for him from the cloak-room . . . otherwise we shall never make a move."

He seemed not to have heard her. She had asked that question, "What tram?" quite deliberately. He would have liked to protest that nothing in his whole life had ever meant so much to him as those moments when they had sat facing one another in a crowd of poor work-people with coal-blackened faces and heads drooping with sleep. He could see the scene in imagination—a newspaper slipping to the floor from a hand gone numb; a bare-headed woman holding up her novelette to catch the light of the lamps, her lips moving as though in prayer. He could hear again the great rain-drops splashing in the dust of the lane behind the church at Talence, could watch the passing figure of a workman crouched over the handlebar of his bicycle, a canvas sack, with a bottle protruding from it, slung over his

shoulder. The trees behind the railings were stretching out their dusty leaves like hands begging for water.

"Do, please, go and fetch my husband. He's not used to drinking so much. I ought to have stopped him. Spirits are so bad for him."

Raymond, who had resumed his seat, got up again and, for the second time, shuddered at what he saw reflected in the mirror. He was still young, but what good would that do him? True, he might still awaken love, but no longer could he choose in whom. To a man who can still flaunt the passing glories of the body's springtime, everything is possible. Had his age been five years less than it was, he might, he thought, have had a chance. Better than most he knew what mere youthfulness can achieve with a woman who has been drained dry, how magically it can overcome antipathies and preferences, shame and remorse, what pricking curiosity, what appetites it can wake. But now he was without a weapon. Looking at himself he felt as a man might do who goes into battle with a broken sword.

"If you won't do what I ask, I suppose I must go myself. They're making him drink. . . . I don't know how I can manage to get him away. How disgusting it all is!"

"What would your Bertrand say if he could see you now, sitting here with me . . . and his father in that state?"

"He would understand everything: he *does* understand everything."

It was at that moment that the noise of a heavy body crashing to the ground came from the bar. Raymond rushed across the room and, with the help of the barman, tried to lift Victor Larousselle, whose feet were caught in the overturned stool. His hand, streaming with blood, still convulsively clutched a broken bottle. Maria tremblingly threw a coat round the shoulders of Bertrand's father, and turned up the collar so as to hide his now purple face. The barman said to Raymond, who was settling the bill, that one could never be sure it wasn't a heart attack,

and half carried the great hulking body to a taxi, so terrified was he of seeing a customer "kick the bucket" before he had got clear of the premises.

Maria and Raymond, perched on the bracket-seats, held the drunken creature in a sitting position. A bloodstain was slowly spreading over the handkerchief which they had wrapped round the injured hand. "This has never happened to him before," Maria moaned. "I ought to have remembered that he can't touch anything but wine. Swear you won't breathe a word of this to anyone." Raymond's mood was exultant. In an access of joy he greeted this unexpected turn in his affairs. No, nothing could have parted him from Maria Cross this evening. What a fool he had been to doubt his lucky star!

Although winter was on the wane, the night was cold. A powdering of sleet showed white on the Place de la Concorde under the moon. He continued to hold up on the back seat the vast mass of flesh from which came the sound of hiccups and a confused burble of speech. Maria had opened a bottle of smelling-salts. The young man adored their faint scent of vinegar. He warmed himself at the flame of the beloved body at his side, and took advantage of the brief flicker of each passing street-lamp to take his fill of the face that looked so lovely in its humiliation. At one moment, when she took the old man's heavy and revolting head between her hands, she looked like Judith.

More than anything she dreaded that the porter might be a witness of the scene, and was only too glad of Raymond's offer to help her drag the sick man to the lift. Scarcely had they got him on to his bed than they saw that his hand was bleeding freely, and that only the whites of his eyes were visible. Maria was worse than useless. She seemed quite incapable of doing the simplest things that would have come naturally to other women. . . . Must she wake the servants, who slept on the seventh floor? . . . What a scandal there would be! She decided to ring up her doctor. But he must have taken off the receiver, for she could get no answer. She burst into sobs. It was then that

Raymond, remembering his father's presence in Paris, had the happy idea of ringing him, and suggested to Maria that he should do so. Without so much as a "Thank you," she started to hunt through the directory for the number of the Grand Hotel.

"He'll be here as soon as he can get dressed and find a taxi."

This time Maria did take his hand. She opened a door and switched on the light.

"Would you mind waiting in here: it's Bertrand's room." She said that the patient had been sick and felt better. But his hand was still giving him a good deal of pain.

As soon as she had left the room Raymond sat down and buttoned his overcoat. The radiator was not giving much heat. His father's sleepy voice was still in his ears. How far away it had sounded. They had not seen one another since old Grandmamma Courrèges had died three years before. At that time Raymond had been in pressing need of money. Perhaps there had been something rude and aggressive in the way he had demanded his share of the inheritance, but what had really got under his skin and precipitated a rupture had been the way in which his father lectured him on the subject of his choice of a profession. The mixture of cadging and pimping by which he had elected to earn a living had horrified the elder man, who regarded such an occupation as being unworthy of a Courrèges. He had gone so far as to try to extract a promise from Raymond that he would find some regular occupation. And now, in a few moments, he would be here, in this flat. What ought his son to do—kiss him, or merely offer him his hand?

He tried to find an answer to the question, but all the time his attention was being drawn to, was being held by, one particular object in the room—Bertrand Larousselle's bed, a narrow iron bed, so unaccommodating, so demure beneath its flowered cotton coverlet that Raymond could not keep himself from bursting out laughing. It was the bed of an elderly spinster or a seminarist.

Three of the walls were quite bare, the fourth was lined with books. The work-table was as neat as a good conscience. 'If Maria came to my place, she'd get a bit of a shock.' She would see a divan so low that it seemed part of the floor. Every woman who ventured into that discreetly dimmed interior was at once conscious of a dangerous sense of being in some strange new world, of a temptation to indulge in activities which would no more commit her than if they had taken place in a different planet—or in the innocent privacy of sleep. . . . But in the room where Raymond was now waiting, no curtains hid the windows frosted by the winter night. Its owner wished, no doubt, that the light of dawn should wake him before the sounding of the earliest bell. Raymond was entirely insensitive to all the evidences of a life of purity. In this room designed for prayer he could see merely a cunning piece of trickery, a deliberate exploitation of refusal, of denial, designed to increase the delights of love by suppressing all obvious allurements. He looked at the titles of some of the books. "What an ass!" he murmured. These volumes that spoke of another world were quite outside his experience and gave him a feeling of disgust. . . . What a time his father was taking! He did not want to be alone much longer. The room seemed to mock at him. He opened the windows and looked out at the roofs beneath a late moon.

"Here's your father."

He closed the window, followed Maria into Victor Larousselle's room, saw a figure bending over the bed, and recognized his father's huge bowler hat lying on a chair, and the ivory-knobbed stick (which had been his horse in the days when he had played at horses). When the doctor raised his head he hardly knew him. Yet he realized that this old man who smiled and put his arm about his shoulder was his father.

"No tobacco, no spirits, no coffee. Poultry at lunch and no butcher's meat at night. Do as I say, and you'll live to be a hundred. . . . That's all."

The doctor repeated the words "That's all," in the drawling voice of a man whose thoughts are elsewhere. His eyes never left Maria's face. She, seeing him standing there motionless, took the initiative, opened the door, and said:

"I think what we all need is a good night's sleep."

The doctor followed her into the hall. Very shyly he said: "It was a bit of luck, our meeting like this." All the time he had been hurriedly dressing, and later, in the taxi, he had been quite convinced that as soon as he had said that Maria would break in with—"Now I've found you again, doctor, I'm not going to let you get away so easily." But that wasn't at all the answer she had made when, from the open door, he had eagerly remarked, "It was a bit of luck. . . ." Four times he repeated the phrase he had so carefully prepared, as though by stressing it he could force from her the hoped-for answer. But no: she just held up his overcoat and did not even show signs of impatience when he failed to find the sleeve. Quite unemotionally she said:

"It really is a very small world. This evening has brought us together after many years. It is more than likely that we shall meet again."

She pretended not to hear him when he said: "But don't you think it is up to us to put a spoke in fortune's wheel?"

He repeated the same remark more loudly: "Don't you think we might manage to put a spoke in fortune's wheel?"

If the dead could come back how embarrassing they would be! They do come back sometimes, treasuring an image of us which we long to destroy, their minds full of memories which we passionately desire to forget. These drowned bodies that are swept in by the flooding tide are a constant source of awkwardness to the living.

"I am very different from the lazy creature whom you once knew, doctor. I want to get to bed, because I've got to be up by seven."

She felt irritated by him for saying nothing. She had a sense of discomfort beneath the brooding stare of this old man who

merely went on repeating: "Don't you think we might put a spoke in fortune's wheel?"

She replied with a good grace, though rather brusquely, that he had her address.

"I scarcely ever go to Bordeaux these days: but perhaps you . . ."

It had been so kind of him to take all this trouble.

"If the staircase light goes out, you'll find the switch *there*."

He made no movement, but stayed obstinately where he was. Did she never, he asked, feel any ill effects from her fall?

Raymond emerged from the shadows: "What fall was that?"

She made a gesture with her head expressive of utter exhaustion.

"What would really give me pleasure, doctor, would be to think that we could write to one another. I'm not the letter-writer I used to be . . . but for you . . ."

He replied: "Letters are worse than useless. What's the point of writing if we are never to see one another?"

"But that's precisely the reason."

"No, no. Do you think that if people knew they were never going to see one another again they would want to prolong their friendship artificially by corresponding, especially if one of the two realized that letter-writing imposed a dreary duty on the other? . . . One becomes a coward, Maria, as one grows older. One has had one's life and one dreads fresh disappointments."

He had never put his feelings so clearly into words. Surely she would understand now!

Her attention had strayed because Larousselle was calling for her, because it was five o'clock, because she wanted to get rid of the Courrèges.

"Well, *I* shall write to *you*, doctor, and you shall have the dreary duty of replying."

But a little later, when she had locked and bolted the door and gone back to the bedroom, her husband heard her laugh and asked what she was laughing at.

"The most extraordinary thing's just occurred to me . . . promise you won't mock. I really believe that the doctor was a bit in love with me in the old Bordeaux days . . . it wouldn't surprise me."

Victor Larousselle replied thickly through clammy lips that he wasn't jealous if that was what she meant, and followed up the remark with one of his hoariest jokes: "He's just ripe for the cold stone." He added that the poor fellow had obviously had a slight stroke. Many of his old patients, who didn't like to abandon him, secretly consulted other doctors.

"Not feeling sick any longer? Sure your hand doesn't hurt?"

No, he was quite comfortable.

"I only hope that the story of what happened to-night doesn't make the rounds in Bordeaux. . . . Young Courrèges is quite capable . . ."

"He never goes there nowadays. Try to get some sleep. I'm going to put out the light."

She sat in the darkness, motionless, until a sound of quiet snoring rose from the bed. Then she went to her room, passing, on the way, Bertrand's half-open door. She could not resist the temptation to push it wide. Standing on the threshold she sniffed. The mingled smell of tobacco and the human body filled her with a cold fury. 'I must have been mad to let him come in here! . . .' She opened the windows to let in the cold air of dawn, and knelt down for a moment at the head of the bed. Her lips moved. She buried her face in the pillow.

XII

THE doctor and Raymond drove away in a taxi. It was like the old days when they had sat together in the carriage with its streaming windows on a suburban road. At first they said no more to one another than they had used to do in that forgotten time. But there was a difference in the quality of their silence. The old man was sagging with weariness and leaned against his son. Raymond held his hand.

"I had no idea that she was married."

"They didn't tell anybody: at least, I believe and hope that they didn't. They certainly didn't tell me."

It was said that young Bertrand had insisted on the situation being regularized. The doctor quoted a remark made by Victor Larousselle: "I am making a morganatic marriage." Raymond muttered: "What dam' cheek!" He stole a glance in the half-light at the tormented face beside him, and saw that the bloodless lips were moving. The frozen expression, the features looking as though they were carved in stone, frightened him. He said the first thing that came into his head.

"How's everybody?"

Flourishing. Madeleine, in particular, said the doctor, was being splendid. She lived for nothing but her two girls, took them out to parties, and hid her sorrow from the world, showing herself worthy of the hero she had lost. (The doctor never neglected an opportunity of praising the son-in-law who had been killed at Guise, striving, in this way, to make honourable amends for the past. He blamed himself for having been wrong about him. So many men in the war had been surprisingly unlike themselves in death.) Catherine, Madeleine's eldest daughter, was engaged to the Michon boy, the youngest of three brothers, but there was to be no public announcement until she was twenty-two:

"You mustn't breathe a word about it."

The voice in which he uttered this injunction was his wife's, and Raymond caught back the words he had been about to say: "Why should anyone in Paris be interested?" The doctor broke off as though suddenly silenced by a stab of pain. The young man began silently to calculate: 'He must be sixty-nine or seventy. Is it possible to go on suffering at that age, and after all these years?' He became suddenly aware of his own hurt, and the consciousness of it frightened him. It wouldn't last . . . very soon it would pass into forgetfulness. He remembered something that one of his mistresses had said: "When I'm in love and going through hell, I just curl up and wait. I know that in a very short while the particular man in question will mean absolutely nothing to me, though at the moment I may be ready to die for him, that I shan't so much as spare a passing glance for the cause of so much suffering. It's terrible to love, and humiliating to stop loving. . . ." All the same, this old man had been bleeding from a mortal wound for seventeen long years. In lives like his, hedged about with routine, dominated by a sense of duty, passion becomes concentrated, is put away, as it were, in cold storage. There is no way of using it up, no breath of warm air can reach it and start the process of evaporation. It grows and grows, stagnates, corrupts, poisons and corrodes the living flesh that holds it prisoner.

They swung round the Arc de Triomphe. Between the puny trees of the Champs Élysées the black road flowed on like Erebus.

"I think I've done with pottering around. I've been offered a job in a factory. They make chicory. At the end of a year I shall be managing director."

The doctor's reply was perfunctory: "I'm so glad, my boy." Suddenly he shot a question: "How did you first meet?"

"Meet whom?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

"The friend who offered me this job?"

"Of course not—Maria."

"It goes back a long way. When I was in my last term at school, we got to exchanging a few words in the tram. I think that's how it all began."

"You never told me, though once, if I remember correctly, you did mention that some friend had pointed her out to you in the street."

"Perhaps I did . . . one's memory gets a bit hazy after seventeen years. Yes, it all comes back now: it was the day after that meeting that she first spoke to me—actually, it was to ask after you. She knew me by sight. I think that if her husband hadn't come over to me this evening she'd have cut me."

This brief interchange seemed to have set the doctor's mind at rest. He leaned back in his corner. He muttered: "Anyhow, what does it matter to me? What does it matter?" He made the old familiar gesture of sweeping away some obstacle, rubbed his cheeks, sat up and half turned towards Raymond in an effort to escape from his thoughts, to occupy his mind only with his son's concerns.

"As soon as you've got an assured position, my boy, hurry up and get married."

Raymond laughed, protested, and the old man was once more driven in upon himself:

"You can have no idea what a comfort it is to live in the middle of a large family. Yes, I mean it. One's all the time got to think about other people's troubles, and those thousands of little hypodermic pricks keep the blood flowing. D'you see what I mean? One has no time to think of one's own secret miseries, of the wounds that strike deep into the very roots of one's being. One gets to rely on all these family concerns. . . . For instance, I meant to stay in Paris until the end of the Conference, but I've suddenly decided to catch the eight o'clock train this morning. I just can't help myself. The great thing in life is to make some sort of refuge for oneself. At the end of one's existence, as at the beginning, one's got to be borne by a woman."

Raymond mumbled something about rather seeing himself dead first. He looked at the shrunken, moth-eaten old figure at his side.

"You can have no idea how safe I've always felt with all of you round me. To have a wife, children, about one, pressing in on one, is a sort of protection against all the undesirable distractions of outside life. You never used to say much to me—I don't mean that as a reproach, dear boy—but I don't think you'll ever realize how often, just as I was on the point of yielding to some delicious, maybe criminal, temptation, I would feel your hand on my shoulder gently guiding me back into the right path."

"How ridiculous to think that there are such things as forbidden pleasures," Raymond muttered. "We're completely different, you and I; I'd have overturned the whole apple-cart in next to no time."

"You're not the only one who made your mother suffer. We're not really so different. Scores of times I've sent the apple-cart spinning—in imagination. You don't know. . . . No, you *don't*. A few casual infidelities would have brought me far less sorrow than the long-drawn-out disloyalty of desire of which I have been guilty for the last thirty years. It is essential that you should know all this, Raymond. You'd find it pretty difficult to be a worse husband than I have been. Oh, I know my orgies never went beyond day-dreaming, but does that make it any better? The way your mother takes her revenge now is by being over-attentive. Her fussing has become a necessity of my existence. The endless trouble to which she goes. She never lets me out of her sight day or night. I shall die in the lap of comfort, never fear. We're not looked after now as we used to be. Servants, as she says, are no longer what they were. We've never replaced Julie—d'you remember Julie? She's gone back to her native village. Your mother does everything. I have to scold her, often. There's nothing she won't turn her hand to—sweeping out the rooms, polishing the floors."

He stopped, then, with a note of supplication in his voice:
"Don't live alone," he said.

Raymond had no time to reply. The taxi stopped in front of the Grand Hotel. He had to get out, feel for his money. The doctor had only just enough time to do his packing.

These early hours of the morning, all given over to street-sweepers and market-gardeners, were familiar to Raymond Courrèges. He breathed in the dawn air, rejoicing in the well-known sights, remembering how he always felt as he walked home in the small hours, physically exhausted, his senses gorged and satisfied, happy as a young animal, wanting nothing but to find its burrow, to curl up and sleep. What a blessing that his father had decided to say good-bye at the door of the Grand Hotel. How he had aged! How he had shrunk! 'There can never be too many miles for my liking, between me and the family,' he thought. 'The further away one's relations, the better.' It came over him that he was no longer thinking about Maria. He remembered that he had a whole lot of things to do to-day. He took out his engagement-book, turned the pages, and was amazed to discover how vast the day had become—or was it that the things with which he had proposed to fill it had diminished in number? The morning?—an empty waste: the afternoon?—two appointments which he had no intention of keeping. He leaned over his day like a child over the rim of a well. Only a few pebbles to drop into it, and *they* wouldn't fill the yawning void. Only one thing could do that—going to see Maria, being announced, being welcomed, sitting in the same room with her, talking to her—it wouldn't matter about what. Even less than that would have sufficed to fill these empty hours and many, many more—even just to have known that he had arranged a meeting with her, no matter how far ahead. With the patience of a marksman in a butt, he would have shot down the days separating him from that longed-for moment. Even if she had put him off, he would have found comfort somehow—provided

she had suggested an alternative date, and the new hope thus started on its way would have been enough to fill the infinite emptiness of his life. For life now had become for him nothing but a feeling of absence which he had got to balance by a feeling of anticipation. 'I must think the whole business out seriously,' he told himself, 'and begin only with what is possible. Why shouldn't I get in touch with Bertrand again and worm my way into his life?' But they had no single taste in common, did not even know the same people. Anyhow, where was he to find him? —in what sacristy run this sacristan to earth? In imagination he obliterated all the intervening stages which separated him from Maria, jumped the gap, and reached the point at which he was holding that mysterious head in the crook of his right arm. He could feel on his biceps the touch of her shaven neck, like the cheek of a young boy. Her face swam towards him, closer, closer, enormously enlarged as on a cinema screen, and no less intangible. . . . It struck him with amazement that the early wayfarers he met did not turn to look at him, did not notice his mania. How well our clothes conceal our real selves! He dropped on to a seat opposite the Madeleine. This seeing her again . . . that was the trouble. He ought never to have seen her again. All the passions in which he had indulged for seventeen years had, unknown to him, been lit to protect himself from her—as the peasants of the Landes start small fires to keep the greater fire from spreading. . . . But he *had* seen her, and the fire had got the better of him, had been increased by the flames with which he had thought to combat it. His sensual aberrations, his secret vices, the cold technique of self-indulgence, so patiently learned, so carefully cultivated, all had added fuel to the conflagration, so that it roared upwards now, sweeping towards him on a vast front with a sound of crackling undergrowth.

'Lie low, curl yourself up into a ball,' he kept on saying to himself. 'It won't last, and until it's over, find some drug with which to stupefy yourself—float with the current.' Yes, but—his father would know no lessening of *his* pain until the day of his

death. What a dreary life he'd led! But would a course of debauchery have freed him from his passion?—that was the question. Everything serves as fuel for passion: abstinence sharpens it: repletion strengthens it; virtue keeps it awake and irritates it. It terrifies and it fascinates. But if we yield, our cowardice is never abject enough to satisfy its exigence. It is a frantic and a horrible obsession. He should have asked his father how on earth he had managed to live with that cancer gnawing at his vitals. . . Of what use is a virtuous existence? What way of escape can it provide? What power has God over passion?

He concentrated his attention on the minute-hand of the great clock away to his left, trying to catch it in the act of moving. By this time, he thought, his father must already have left the hotel. He suddenly felt that he would like to give the old man one last kiss. There was more than paternity between them, there was another tie of blood. They were related in their common feeling for Maria Cross. . . .

Raymond hastened towards the river, though there was plenty of time before the train was due to leave. Perhaps he was yielding to that species of madness which compels those whose clothes have caught fire to run. He was oppressed by the intolerable conviction that he would never possess Maria Cross, that he would die without ever having her. Though he had had his will of many women, taken them, held them for a while, abandoned them, he felt himself to be in the grip of the same sort of wild despair which sometimes overwhelms men who have never known physical love, men condemned to a life of virginity, when they face the horror of dying without ever having known the delights of the flesh. What he had had in the past no longer counted. Nothing seemed worth the having save what he would never have.

Maria! He was appalled to think how heavily one human being may, without wishing it, weigh in the scales of another's destiny. He had never given a thought to those virtues which, radiating from ourselves, operate, often without our knowing it

and often over great distances, on the hearts of others. All the way along the pavement that stretches between the Tuileries and the Seine he found himself, for the first time in his life, compelled to think about things to which, up till then, he had never given a moment's consideration. Probably because on the threshold of this new day he felt emptied of all ambitions, of all plans, of all possible amusements, he found that there was nothing now to keep his mind from the life that lay behind him. Because there was no longer any future to which he might look forward, the past swarmed into his mind. For how many living creatures had not his mere proximity meant death and destruction? Even now he did not know to what lives he had given purpose and direction, what lives he had cut adrift from their moorings; did not know that because of him some woman had killed the young life just stirring in her womb; that;because of him a young girl had died, a friend had gone into a seminary; and that each of these single dramas had given birth to others in an endless succession. On the brink of this appalling emptiness, of this day without Maria, which was to be but the first of many other days without her, he was made aware, at one and the same moment, of his dependence and his solitude. He felt himself forced into the closest possible communion with a woman with whom he would never make contact. It was enough that her eyes should see the light for Raymond to live forever in the darkness. For how long? If he decided that, at no matter what cost, he must fight his way out of the dense blackness, must escape from this murderous law of gravity, what choices were there open to him but the alternatives of stupor or of sleep?—unless this star in the firmament of his heart should go suddenly dead, as all love goes dead. He carried within him a tearing, frantic capability of passion, inherited from his father—of a passion that was all-powerful, that would breed, until he died, still other planetary worlds, other Maria Crosses, of which, in succession, he would become the miserable satellite. . . . There could be no hope for either of them, for father or for son, unless, before they died, He

should reveal Himself Who, unknown to them, had drawn and summoned from the depths of their beings this burning, bitter tide.

He crossed the deserted Seine and looked at the station clock. By this time his father must be in the train. He went down on to the departure platform and walked along the row of waiting coaches. He did not have to search for long. Through the glass of one of the windows he saw the corpse-like face etched on the darkness of the interior. The eyes were closed, the clasped hands lay on a spread of newspaper, the head leaned slightly backwards, the mouth was half open. Raymond tapped with his finger. The corpse opened its eyes, recognized the source of the sound, smiled, and, with uncertain steps, came out into the corridor. But all the doctor's happiness was ruined by his childish fear that the train might start before Raymond had had time to get out.

"Now that I've seen you, now that I know you wanted to see *me* again, my mind is at rest. Better go now, dear boy. They're closing the doors."

It was in vain that the young man assured him that they had a good five minutes before the train would start, and that, in any case, it stopped at the Austerlitz station. The other continued to show signs of nervousness until his son was once more safely on the platform. Then, lowering the window, he gazed long and lovingly at him.

Raymond asked him whether he had got everything he wanted. Would he like another paper or a book? Had he reserved a seat in the restaurant car? To all these questions the doctor replied "Yes, yes." Hungrily he fixed his eyes on the young man who had asked them; the man who was so different from himself, and yet so like him—the part of his own flesh and blood that would survive him for a few more years, but that he was fated never to see again.

FRANCOIS MAURIAC

THE ENEMY

(*Le Mal*)

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I

IT was the habit of Madame Dézaymeries to get up at daybreak and, after Mass, to waken Fabien with a kiss. The kiss tasted of church and smelt of fog. The child loved the light, as of some unknown land, that showed in his mother's eyes. Each afternoon, when he got back from the Park, she took him to the Cathedral for the Holy Hour. He watched her lips, convinced that she must be seeing God because she never stopped talking to Him. Fabien was conscious of the boredom of the passing moments, but there was in them, too, a quality of pleasure. He pretended that his right hand was a woman whom he was loading with necklaces. These necklaces were a rosary. A priest passed under a canopy, preceded by a small boy. A bell tinkled. The figures of the faithful turned, with a noise of scraping chairs, towards this manifestation of the Presence. When the Monstrance gleamed in the middle of its six candles, Madame Dézaymeries did not kneel, but stood, head up, looking God straight in the face.

When evening came, she walked up and down the passage, her rosary twined about her fingers. She held it stretched between her two hands, like a skein of wool, the better to see the point she had reached in her "telling." Fabien followed behind, holding up her dress, which he liked to imagine was of silk brocade. Night began for him with the evening prayer. His mother put him to bed, made the sign of the Cross on his forehead with her thumb, crossed his hands on his breast, and listened while he repeated the ritual sentences that should guard him against the threat of sudden death. She did not scruple to let him see the possibility that sleep might open straight into the endless vistas of eternity. His life followed the rhythm of the liturgical year. When the candles were lit round the manger, he became a shepherd. On Holy Thursday he kneeled before the stripped

altar, hearing with mingled terror and delight the lamentations of Jeremiah, and watching the candles of yellow wax go out one by one. The bells on Resurrection Morning danced with the gaiety of life reborn. The air of the Month of Mary filled his nostrils with the scent of white roses. No sombre weight lay upon his life. Austerity wreathed it like a mist shot through with sunlight. No fears of hell-fire troubled him, nor yet of purgatory, since no Indulgence was neglected, and he drew with method on the treasures of the Faith.

Joseph, his fifteen-year elder brother, took delight in games that foreshadowed his vocation, games in which altars, processions and sermons played the principal parts. He was at boarding-school, and came home only on Sundays after Vespers. The prevalent view was that, thin and overgrown though he was, he had a constitution of iron because he had escaped whooping-cough, mumps, measles and all the childish ailments to which Fabien owed many periods of dreamy happiness during which he lived the life of a lazy and pampered Prince. But sickness of quite another kind was lying in wait for Joseph. It was, indeed, already at work in his system, though, for the time being, the only sign of its presence was what Madame Dézaymeries called a "shocking cold" which the local nursing Sister treated with a daily spoonful of "Tolu" syrup. Fabien sought his company but rarely, and as a rule only when, after making his confession and tortured by scruples lest he might not have described certain of his faults in sufficient detail, he went to him for comfort. Quite often he would deliberately munch a blade of grass before Mass, or swallow a mouthful of water when he cleaned his teeth, so as to avoid having to take Communion, so fearful was he of committing sacrilege. Joseph was always very indignant at such tricks.

Madame Dézaymeries' Spiritual Director had a little talk with Fabien every day. He did not wear his stole on these occasions, and was careful to smile throughout the interview. With nothing of aggressiveness in his manner, but with an air of

determination which was never oppressive, he had so worked on Madame Dézaymeries that she had grown to regard her widowhood as a species of religious vocation. He had set before this family of three the goal of perfection, and kept them isolated in a hedged and cloistered life. They visited none but the poor, and limited their social existence to official contacts with the clergy of the parish, about whom, Madame Dézaymeries sometimes went so far as to maintain, there was nothing supernatural. As President of the Christian Mothers, and Vice-President of the Ladies of Charity, she lent her drawing-room for meetings so little worldly that the dust-sheets were never taken off the chairs, and the chandelier in its protective envelope hung like Montgolfier's balloon, motionless beneath a ceiling that prevented it from rising.

This pious routine had such a hold on Fabien that even at school, whither he went when he was about thirteen, he was completely untroubled by the prickings of the flesh. Hints and murmured revelations fell dead on the threshold of his heart, and penetrated no further. He was entirely without interest in the things of the body, and was blessed with a divine stupidity in all matters that had to do with the vice of sensual indulgence. A saintly woman kept her hand in front of his eyes and shut him away from any vision of the world. He was wholly without knowledge of the powers that lurk within us, of the strident clamour of desire, of the storm that rages about the ship of humanity when God slumbers in the stern. But no woman can, unaided, make a man. Madame Dézaymeries, happy in her contemplation of the innocent and tranquil face that Fabian bent above his books, was blind to the fact that his arms were not so weak as Joseph's, nor his chest so hollow. At fifteen his boy's head with its brown hair sat ill upon his sturdy frame. She forgot that another than herself had had a share in the forming of this young creature whose expression was so pure, though he was over-given to dreaming; who was so scornful of bodily activities though built for physical prowess; who was content to live in

ignorance of a body which stood already on the threshold of manhood.

She never spoke to her sons of their father, who had died shortly before Fabien was born. Yet the boy had only to look at his strong peasant bones, at his large, well-formed hands and wrists, at the muscles that were so tough for all their lack of exercise, to get some inkling of the nature of the unknown man who had given him life. Though the two boys had been brought up entirely by their mother, their movements were those of "poor papa," and the thick tones and country intonations of their voices belonged to him. Like him they were slow of step and seemingly docile to all external authority. But, deep down, they were reserved and inaccessible. Up to the age of twenty they knew nothing of the denizens of this world—with one exception. As the result of some curious aberration, their mother had given the freedom of the family circle to a stranger. Twice in each year, between Christmas and the New Year, and again in the middle of July, she shot across their night-sky, like one of those stars whose trajectory can be plotted in advance, leaving a trail of brilliance.

She had only to ring the front-door bell for the boys to go scampering from the fireside. "It's Fanny Barrett! It's Fanny!" they would cry in the hall. A distillation of perfume hung about her furs. For a moment she pressed her veiled face to Madame Dézaymeries' shoulder. A pastry-cook and a waiter always came with her, because she feared that the dinner prepared for her might be insufficient. Fabien long remembered the labels on her bags, "Wanted on Voyage." It seemed to him as though the salt of all the oceans of the world had eaten into them. Toys, sweets and books made their appearance to a wonderful and rustling accompaniment of tissue-paper. Octavie got the green room ready—that spare room that was spared only for Fanny.

The children knew that Fanny Barrett had been left an orphan, had moved from Dublin, her native city, and had come to the great port on the south-west coast of France where her uncle, on

whom the duty of bringing her up had devolved, was associated in business with their Dupouy grandfather. At that time, Madame Dézaymeries, or, as she then was, Thérèse Dupouy, had the reputation of being a gawky girl of devout tendencies. Her father and mother, though rich, lived in self-imposed poverty. The only pleasure they would countenance, whether for themselves or for others, was that of "putting money aside." This they regarded as being the highest of all virtues. Old Dupouy had trained his wife in the ethics of economy so successfully that their house, filled with old trunks, disused bottles and empty packing-cases, had at first the dusty, overcrowded appearance of one of those dwellings where nothing is ever lost or thrown away. An elder and detestable sister had succeeded in casting a blight on Thérèse's youth. The Dupouys were one of those "good families" the members of which can endure one another only by behaving as miracles of virtue, who put up with this present life simply and solely because they believe in a better life to come. On each first Thursday in the month, Monsieur Maggie, Dupouy's partner, who was held in horror by the family because of his dissolute life (he kept a *première danseuse* called Mademoiselle Lovati, who cost him a hundred louis a month), was always at his wits' end to know what to do with his niece Fanny during her twelve-hours' exeat fron the Convent. He handed her over, therefore, to the tender mercies of the gloomy Thérèse, much as he might have given her a tame bird, and very soon a passionate devotion grew up between the two girls. The Dupouy parents dared not object to a charge of such manifest piety, but they grew to dread those recurring Thursdays which filled their melancholy abode with gusts of laughter and the sound of young feet racing up and down the passages. Much later, when Fanny, now of age and her own mistress, returned from Ireland after a long period of eclipse, to visit her great friend who was already a widow and the mother of two sons, living in what had once been the Dupouy, but was now the Dézaymeries' house, Thérèse blamed herself for having been

too indulgent towards the faults of her junior, whose coquetry, petulance and excessive fondness for caresses she had, in the past, gone so far as to encourage. Particularly was she conscious of a sense of guilt in that she had taken so little heed of her companion's neglect of everything that touched upon religion. But this early love had left deep traces in her character, as was proved by the fact that she still remained loyal to it and shut her eyes to what, in anybody else, she would have regarded as an abomination.

The Irish girl had married an officer of the Royal Navy, but spoke of him as little as possible. She wandered about the world as freely as though she had been a widow. The Dézaymeries knew nothing of her vagabond existence, and were completely unaware that she had been, for some time, separated from her husband, that she busied herself with selling curios in every capital of Europe, and that for many years she had lived comfortably off the proceeds of a trip to the Far East from which she had returned with a quantity of lacquer.

Her independence worried Madame Dézaymeries far less than did her lack of religion. It was not so much that she was actively hostile as utterly indifferent. For her the problem of religion just had no existence. On one occasion she interrupted a lecture from Thérèse on the subject, with a "But, darling, it's all so *improbable*!" Thérèse found it convenient to lay the blame on Fanny's husband—an Anglican by birth but an atheist by temperament—and persuaded herself that it was her duty not to scare her friend away, but, by giving her a warm welcome, to lead her all unsuspecting to the Manger. The truth of the matter was that the widow clung to the younger woman because she represented the only tenderness of feeling she had ever known. When, after their mother's death, the family estate had been broken up, there had been a breach between Thérèse and her sister, since when no one had ever dreamed of giving her a kiss except her children and this same Fanny whose lack of all religious feeling she chose to regard as a natural infirmity.

Fabien, already clearer-sighted than his mother, found this characteristic of her childhood's friend at once attractive and terrifying. He hung about the alluring visitor whose error was, to all seeming, invincible. No argument had the slightest effect on her. It was as though she had no part nor lot in the sin of Adam, as though her tiny, isolated destiny were moving to its predestined end in a world that knew nothing of redemption. God could appeal neither to her heart nor to her reason; not but what she was a philosopher and prided herself on a liking for abstract ideas.

She had, all the same, when she was staying with the Dézaymerics, to acquiesce in Friday fasts and Sunday observances. "But why," she would say, half joking, half in earnest, "but why make life gloomier than it is already?" To such remarks Thérèse would reply by pointing out how useless it was to shut one's eyes to the fact that the world is a place full of suffering, to which Christ alone can give meaning and value. The Irish girl merely laughed and gave her dear friend a kiss.

She was fonder of Fabien than of Joseph, and marked her preference by constant fondlings. Only a superstitious, a morbid, craving for contrast could explain the attraction which, twice every year, brought this lover of beauty into a cribbed and Jansenist provincial home. She would descend upon it with a flapping of weary wings. No doubt an emotional loyalty which nothing could altogether destroy had something to do with her behaviour. She might be the slave of her desires, but it so happened that some of her desires were good. Her first and perhaps her only really pure passion had found its object in a young girl. Each year she wandered back to this clear source of refreshment, known only to herself, and bathed her hot hands and painted face in its icy waters.

But a year came when, unknown to herself, a change of emphasis took place in that love which had the power to bring her back from the far places of Europe. Was it for Thérèse Dézaymerics that she came, or for the boy who once, on a July

afternoon, in the shuttered drawing-room which the two lads believed to be sacred to the spirit of their dead father, had roughly broken from the two bare arms so fondly twined about his neck? Though not fully aware of the peril, Madame Dézaymeries was conscious of a vague feeling of alarm. She felt its presence deep within her, could *smell* the spiritual threat. Fabien, in a mood of childish fun not wholly innocent, would creep away and smoke the butt-ends of Fanny's drugged and scented cigarettes. His mother, always scrupulous in her judgments, was careful to avoid any suspicion that might incriminate her friend. To her she was still the unsophisticated little companion who had clung to her in the old days, nor would she let anything disturb that happy memory. But it was not altogether easy to maintain such an attitude, and again and again she would say to herself, though with dwindling conviction, 'There's no evil in her . . . it's just that we're not used to her ways.' Another of her self-deceiving phrases was: 'She's such an oddity.' Experience had never taught her that vice may often hide behind eccentricity, and lurk in the shadow of quiddities and affectations. Loyalty to this affection, in which God had no share, was her secret weakness. Trained though she was to examine her conscience with meticulous care, accustomed though she might be to explore with morbid and meticulous intensity the motives of her every thought, she always averted her eyes from the special corner of her heart where her tender affection for Fanny dwelt. Had their visitor ever been guilty of carelessness, the Dézaymeries might have been warned to be on their guard. But it amused her to adapt herself to the exigencies of their cloistered life. She chose her dresses and disciplined her tongue with the sole object of charming her Christian hosts.

She did not know that her spirit gave off a smell. When she went away she left behind her a troubled odour which hung about the very air that Madame Dézaymeries breathed. As, when the shot bird has vanished, a scrap of fluff among the dead leaves will show the sportsman where it is lying, so Fabien's melan-

choly languors were full of meaning to her. She noted his silences. Where the lovely bird had fallen, the boy's heart bore, as it were, a physical mark. On the pretext of wanting to be undisturbed, he insisted on doing his lessons in the green room, which was never heated and had a northerly aspect. He rummaged in the dressing-table drawers and hoarded as treasure-trove forgotten ribbons and a tortoiseshell comb.

At last, when Fabien was sixteen, Madame Dézaymeries had her eyes opened. That year Fanny Barrett did not pay her accustomed visit. Each evening between Christmas and the New Year Fabien was on the watch, his face pressed to the window, or lurking on the landing, his ears pricked for the sound of a footstep. Joseph, who had always instinctively avoided Fanny, poked gentle fun at him. Of the three of them, he, already a priest at heart, already a sworn enemy of those lost women who have it in their power to bring damnation into unfledged lives, was by far the most sensitively alive to the corruption which she carried about with her. One evening, when the two brothers were deep in an argument, Joseph maintaining that to paint one's face was a deadly sin, their mother had had to silence them. After the New Year, Fabien begged her to write to Fanny at the various addresses she had left. The boy's general taciturnity, the prolonged silences into which he fell, were a sign that all was not as it should be, and she became alarmed. Finally, she confided in her Spiritual Director. The good Father continued to smile as usual, because his smile was a permanent feature of his face which nothing would ever erase, but his words expressed a deep displeasure. She had, he said, locked in the wolf with the sheep. Her care for the young soul in her charge had been of no avail, because the Evil One had been able to sow his seed at leisure. So shaken did she seem to be by his reproof that he felt bound to soften the hard words he had spoken, and to this end added that, since it was Fabien's destiny to live in the world, it might be no bad thing that he should learn the nature of its illusory charms. The mother's imprudence might, God willing, serve,

after all, to ensure the boy's salvation. All the same, he warned her to turn his temporary separation to good account, and to see to it that the friendship should be permanently discontinued.

The priest had little difficulty in bringing Fabien to a calmer state of mind. But the only effect of this was that the boy showed less confidence than ever in his mother, avoided her questions, and, though he appeared to have lowered his defences, was in fact more wary than ever. During the Easter holidays, which were spent as usual on the Dézaymeries' country estate some twenty miles from the city, he developed a strong liking for solitary walks. He would set off alone through the pine-woods and spend long days out on the heath which, though it formed part of his father's property, was, with its sandy distances, its straight, tall tree-trunks gashed with resin-oozing scars, a visible symbol of his mother's teaching. Nothing more arid than this countryside could well be imagined, nothing more featureless, more uniform. Yet, for all that, it is a land of hidden springs with waters stained red by the stony soil. Ice-cold, they bubble up beneath the over-shadowing alders and in the thickets of wild mint. Just so is the human heart, trained by the will to woo austerity, but thrilling to the call of love and informed by grace. When evening fell the silence was so complete that the ear could catch the movement of the hidden streams on the surface of which lay long trails of slowly moving weed that looked like the hair of drowned and vanquished nymphs held prisoner by depths of stainless sand and washed by freshets. Giant pines made a circle of gloom about the house. As straitly as by the high walls of the Catholic faith, by its unbreached and solid doctrine, the Dézaymeries lived hemmed about by the endless army of the pines which stood in serried ranks for forty miles. Only in that far distance did an ultimate ridge of sand lie as a barrier against the ocean surge. No austere heart is less responsive to the lure of passion than is this countryside to the magic of spring. The stunted oaks greet the winds of April with a rustle of dead leaves, and only the song of birds is eloquent of love.

Madame Dézaymeries felt a deep concern at these lonely expeditions from which Fabien would return with bleeding hands, and sometimes with dead leaves in his hair. She was alarmed to find that she felt lost when he was not with her, and that the companionship of Joseph brought her no comfort. Joseph, at this time, was a thin, tall youth who walked with a stoop, knew the names of all the curés of all the parishes of the diocese, and found his chief pleasure in playing on a miniature harmonium.

It was in the course of these holidays that, realizing her preference for Fabien, she sternly sat in judgment on her feelings and decided that her much-loved son must be sent away from home. She saw only too well what joy it would be for her to grow old with him beside her, and indulged herself with the thought that she might suffer the more by rejecting the sweet temptation. She began to speak to him of the École des Chartes, which was the obvious goal of anyone who had so strong a taste for the history of the Middle Ages. In this way her passion for self-sacrifice led her to plan the establishment of her son in that city where every passion can be gratified.

No incident came to disturb the family circle, where Fanny Barrett's name was no longer mentioned. In July Fabien took his baccalauréat, and the family removed once again to the country. There, in Les Landes, the sand concentrates the heat of heaven, and the crowding trees present a barrier that stops and turns aside the promise of cool breezes. All three were so consumed by inner heat as to be insensible to the torrid weather. Joseph, when daylight ebbed, rehearsed the reading of his breviary with the aid of a black-bound book crammed with sacred pictures. Fabien avoided his brother, but could not escape the rigour of the dog-days. In the pitiless blaze of noon he would lie with a book by Père Gratry on the bank of the stream where the warm moisture of the spongy moss brought refreshment to his body. The heathy wastes were filled with the tumult of cicadas. Blue or tawny dragonflies hovered above the bracken

fronds. Now and again the play of squirrels would set the motionless tree-tops momentarily swaying. Imprisoned among the gashed, tormented trunks, where his dreaming mind could find no outlet from the constricting sand, Fabien knew that nothing would come to shatter the drowsy peace of the afternoon save possibly the breathless sound of tocsin bells warning of heath fires. The merciless season of late summer makes the promise of autumn seem like a breath of deliverance. The first shower brings respite alike to earth and human flesh. The rain patters on the branches with a sound of happy tears. The drops, caught in their fall and absorbed by all the sickly leaves, never reach the sandy, burned-up surface of the earth. Westward, the pine trunks stand in black array, whipped by brief squalls born on the bitter wind.

But in Fabien's heart it was August still, and he burned with a passion that he did not understand.

In October Joseph was received into the Seminary at Issy-les-Moulineaux. A little later it was Fabien's turn to depart. One November evening, his mother, stern in her resolve not to see him off on the Paris train, touched his forehead with the kiss which was her habitual talisman for the perilous passage of the hours of darkness. So successfully did she disguise her emotion that he dared not exhibit his own. But when at last, among the noises of the city, she could no longer hear the sound of the fly that was taking him from her, she let her widowed glance play about the vacant room. The lamp shone only on an empty chair. Octavie had already made her bed ready for the night. The hideous curtains of deep purple that masked the windows looked black.

II

EVEN when Fabien, in the early hours, stood shivering on the platform of the d'Orsay station, his suitcase in his hand, the climate of his mind remained unaltered. He was imprisoned at the centre of a cocoon spun by his mother and by his Spiritual Director. How, then, was it possible that he should feel the impact of Paris? In the hotel where he was lodged, close to the Catholic Institute, he was for ever passing bishops on the stairs, tottering old men leaning on the arms of discreetly dressed valets. There was a prevailing smell of vegetables which reminded him of school, nor in these musty odours of the kitchen was there any admixture of those scents that, in hotels of a different sort, fill the passages when the rooms are being "done." Such time as he did not spend at the École des Chartes, at the Record Office or the National Library he gave to a small group which existed for the study of social problems. But the theories and the formulæ which he read in various learned journals and glibly repeated, had no real hold on his secret self. They were merely an element of the mental atmosphere which kept him from the outside world. As a river may flow through a lake without becoming part of it, so did Fabien move through Paris. Of the ardours burning in the secret lives of men, ardours that may be glimpsed in the tense expressions of certain faces lit by the candle-light of Montmartre or of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, he knew nothing. Never was a scrupulous Christian so empty of enthusiasm. He went so far as to take positive satisfaction in the sense of spiritual aridity which beset him, imagining that his feet were set upon that path of purification so well known to the mystics as desolate and comfortless. Strong in his Jansenist heritage, he held aloof from all contact with his fellow-students, never relaxing his hold upon his feelings, never seeking the intimacies of friendship, but meeting all advances with the cold

detachment of his Dézaymeries training. He did not even make an effort to pay a visit to his brother at Issy. By sheer will-power he kept himself within the bleak rigidity of duty. But even so, he would often, of an evening, close his books and let his attention wander. The silence of the room spread till it held his very mind enveloped. He went to the window and drew the curtains aside. A frozen moon sailed above the city where millions of hearts were beating. The glass of the pane was cold to his forehead. He did not even try to pray, conscious that no words of love other than those contained in his prescribed evening devotions would rise to his lips. He was like a dry desert that is fully aware of its dryness. But, deep within himself he could catch, as from the distance of a torrid summer day, the echo of a muted rumbling. Fearful, yet with a stirring of hope, the listener says, "A storm is brewing"—a storm that will bruise the vine-shoots with its hail, but will bring, as well, relief to the dried and gaping earth, to the leaves drooping with the heat. Sometimes, so lonely was his state, he would fall so far as to listen to the confidences of the chambermaid who implored him to protect her from the unwelcome attentions of the "master," an uncouth and pasty sacristan, and of his sixteen-year-old son who had a flat head, looked like a louse, and was always lying in wait for her in the passage.

During Lent, Madame Dézaymeries paid a visit to Paris. He went with her to Issy, where Joseph, already suffering from his lungs and behindhand in his studies, sat coughing in the dark parlour under the painted stare of Sulpician worthies. He showed them the theatrical chapel—a sumptuous antechamber to the throne-room of the King of Kings. Fabien envied Joseph his life in this holy mountain, this tabernacle. It never occurred to him that, left to himself, he would have felt no wish to go and see him there. Madame Dézaymeries was filled with admiration of his virtue, of his active response to the charms of the perfect life even in the very heart of Paris. An experienced priest would have seen in it the ultimate rictus of a will absurdly

stretched to breaking-point, and quite untouched by the spirit of love.

When he returned after the Easter holidays, Fabien began to take stock of his loneliness. The old stones of palaces and bridges lay basking in the soft radiance of a misty sun. The city was full of young bodies responsive to the call of spring, meeting at every corner, sitting on the terrace of every café. The air was full of stale romance. It was the time of year when the enemy within us finds a ready ally in the outward scene. To the moaning of desire repressed and stifled, nature replies with an invitation to escape, with a proffered gift of satisfaction. At the school even the most studious leaned gazing from the windows, their hands and their foreheads moist. A thousand strident posters called temptingly from sun-baked walls. It was that season when the streets are full of faces that no longer try to hide their secret yearnings, when parted lips and seeking eyes take no account of the dangerous abyss.

The threat of an approaching examination at first saved Fabien from himself. He tired his eyes with poring over facsimiles of ancient documents. In his brief snatches of leisure he dreamed of the moment, now close at hand, when his weariness would find rest in country air. Among all those motionless and wounded trees whose tops alone swayed gently, he would be but one wounded thing the more. Soon he would take his way to that land of scented heat. . . .

But, two days before he was due to start, a letter from his mother filled him with consternation. She told him to fetch Joseph from the Seminary, and to travel home with him. The boy had sent word that he was very ill, and his superiors had made no attempt to hide from Madame Dézaymeries the fact that there was very little hope indeed of saving the stripling priest. Fabien was overcome with terror when he saw the tall, emaciated body standing at the top of the main staircase at Issy, supported by two fellow-seminarists. If only he had kept a watchful eye on him, had not left him so utterly alone! The

night that followed was horrible. Fabien lay in the upper bunk of their sleeper, hearing through the noises of the train his brother's paroxysms of coughing, and the sound of the spitoon rattling on the shelf.

For a day or two it seemed as though the air of the country would check the progress of disease. But one night a sudden hæmorrhage showed that it had returned with redoubled strength. The summer became a nightmare. The noise of coughing tore the siesta hours to shreds, and even the scent of the pines could not overpower the stench of iodoform, though the windows were kept always wide open. Madame Dézaymeries insisted on Fabien spending his days in the air, at the mercy of the hot sun. She stood at the door of the room where her other son lay dying, intent on keeping the young and healthy life from coming near. As he wandered through the damp heat that hung above the stream, Fabien fancied that he could still hear the sound of coughing.

A night came when he was awakened by the noise of ominous retchings. He heard a door creak, voices whispering, and the clink of china. He got up. The pitchpine of the stairs was cool to his bare feet. He crept to the closed door and caught from within the low murmur of frightened words: "Is it hopeless? Am I going to die?" and the voice of Madame Dézaymeries replying, "Yes, my boy, it is quite hopeless." "Have I still a month or two to live?" "No, Joseph, no." "A few weeks, then? . . ." Fabien put his hands over his ears, went back to his room, and stood leaning on the wooden balcony. The sound of living waters reached him. A dark blur of tree-tops half concealed the stars. A bird's note sounded like a sob.

During the days that followed, Madame Dézaymeries, as she ate her hurried meals, took note of Fabien's pallor. More than once she seemed to be on the point of issuing an order, but hesitated. At last she spoke. The doctors had said that he ought to go away at once. Joseph might linger on for months. It would be better for Fabien to return to Paris before the end of the

holidays. He put up a show of resistance, but hoped that it would be overcome. At the end of August, since Joseph continued to enjoy an unhoped-for respite, he let himself be persuaded. He made use of his impending departure as an excuse for encouraging the dying boy. "D'you think I should be going away if there was really any danger?" But just as he was closing the door, the look of the lie fading from his face, he noticed in the glass of the wardrobe two eyes fixed upon him with lucid awareness, two agonised and dilated eyes that could read only too well the message of a face from which the mask had fallen. At that moment, though he had never been particularly fond of his brother, he recalled the games they had played together, and was assailed by a swarm of all the shared memories of their common childhood, of the pill-box in which they had kept their collection of pebbles, of the pine-cone they had buried and dug up again when the next holidays came round. He wept because never again would he see this witness of his earliest years, this boy-priest with a heart devoured by love, who was more chaste than a young girl; this child who had been starved of all affection but had never uttered a word of complaint except to God.

III

JOSEPH DÉZAYMERIES died in the odour of sanctity on a day of early December. As soon as the funeral was over Fabien decided that he would stay with his mother until after the New Year holidays. Madame Dézaymeries allowed nothing, during those winter evenings, to distract her attention from the pale face of her surviving son. She noticed how, as Advent progressed, and already the appearance of Christmas trees and cradles kept the children's faces glued to the sweet-shop windows, he seemed to grow more tense and worried. She sat

knitting garments for the poor. The sirens of ships leaving harbour, the rattle of cabs, the rustle made by the turning of a page, the chiming of clocks, some close at hand and others distant, the crackling of the fire—all these familiar, comfortable sounds had the effect of keeping Fabien uneasily on the alert. She looked at the young man facing her. Only in the dark, soft depths of his eyes could she still trace some remnant of the pious child he once had been. She prayed for Joseph, reciting in French the Canticle prescribed by the Church for use when interceding for the dead—"If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" A deep despairing note crept into her voice which reminded Fabien of those days in his childhood when he had been taken to visit his father's grave in the country cemetery. On those occasions she had always told him to take off his cap. He had noticed the pathetic efforts made by the living to prevent the wild riot of nature, which crept up to the cemetery's very walls, from choking with grass and roots the space where the bodies which had given them life lay rotting in the ground. A damp wind was usually rattling the bleached and colourless beads of the funeral wreaths. . . . At other moments he saw again in memory the waxen mummy of his brother Joseph as it had lain upon the bed, the scalp showing white between the strands of hair, the bony structure of the face looking as though it were thrusting upwards and about to pierce the skin's dry parchment. He sighed, and murmured: "Well, he is out of pain, now," to which she replied with relentless honesty, "Let us pray that he be out of his pain."

On the 24th December mother and son were sitting up preparatory to going to Midnight Mass. Between stars and roofs the chimes held sway.

Then Fanny came in.

They had heard nothing, neither the sound of her cab, the ringing of the bell, nor the closing of the front-door. She stood there, saying nothing, swathed in furs, a veil over her face. Only her painted mouth struck a vivid note. It was not smiling. For

a moment or two she stayed where she was, not coming near them.

"Let me just look at you. . . . How you've grown, Fabien, how tall you are. . . ."

She stared at him as he moved away from the lamp. Then she said again: "Why, you're a man now!"

How was it that these perfectly ordinary and harmless words should sound so shameless? While she was speaking she had taken off her travelling hat, and now at last a smile showed in her rather shortsighted eyes. Nevertheless she seemed to diffuse an atmosphere of unease, of secretiveness. She talked of Joseph, mention of whose death she had seen in some newspaper. Fabien, struck dumb by emotion, kept his eyes fixed upon her. It was as though she had suddenly swum up from the depths of the last two years to the surface. He no longer recognized her. It was not that she looked older or more worn, but that she seemed to have become smaller, to have fallen away. The colour of her hair was more violent than it used to be, her make-up cruder. Her body had thickened, and there was about it a sweet and heavy scent. Yes, her words were true. He had become a man, and that was why she frightened him.

All the same, he ran to the kitchen to make sure that Octavie was getting the green room ready. While he was gone, Fanny rather nervously explained the reason for her long silence.

"You look so stern, so hard!—much sterner and much harder than in the old days. I don't know how I'm going to be able to tell you. . . ."

Then, without any further beating about the bush, she announced that she was no longer living with her husband. They had been apart now for some considerable time.

"You've no idea, darling, what awful habits these sailors pick up!"

Thérèse never knew that Fanny had almost died of drug-poisoning when she was twenty. The wretched man she had married had turned her into an addict. She had had to go into

a home for treatment. . . . She stood, now, waiting for some word of compassion, some movement expressive of pity. But Madame Dézaymeries, rigid and silent, listened to her like a judge upon the bench. She was wearing a knitted cap of black wool, and her neck was enclosed in a tight tulle collar with a white edging. Her thick eyebrows were twisted in a frown that gave her a hard expression. Her grey hair, drawn tightly back from the temples, gave the effect of having been flattened by the constant wearing of a nun's coif. Perhaps at that very moment Fanny may have been remembering the hot-tempered girl who, years ago, used to lecture her, and how the blood would suddenly rush into her colourless cheeks and flush them red: was seeing again the young rose-tree whose every bud had been cut and hoarded for the harvest of the Lord.

"I've divorced him," stammered Fanny. "I had every right to do so. I really think, Thérèse, that you are the only person in the whole world who would feel like this about it. Don't look so relentless. . . ."

Madame Dézaymeries remained icily aloof. The Irish woman, by this time thoroughly ill at ease, stood tidying her hair. She dared not look at her hostess, but almost in a whisper continued:

"What will you think when I tell you that I have married again? Is it a sin to want to be happy?"

Madame Dézaymeries silenced her with a gesture:

"That's enough! Say no more! I am not sitting in judgment on you, Fanny, but you must leave this house. For years I weakly listened to the promptings of my heart. I realize now the enormity of my crime. If I turn my back upon you it is not because of anything *I* feel. Another's safety is at stake, and for him I shall be held responsible through all eternity. . . . May mine be the guilt, and mine alone! . . . I beg you to forgive me. I shall never cease to pray for you, to suffer for you . . . but you *must* leave this house, Fanny!"

She opened the door, summoned Octavie, and told her to get the concierge to carry down the bags and call a cab.

"Are you really turning me out, Thérèse—*me*?" She began to sob, and Thérèse, looking at the features on which time had already left its traces, was reminded of the puckered face of a little girl in tears whom once she had comforted. She, too, was weeping, and could only repeat:

"I will pray for you: I will suffer for you!" She took the lamp, opened the door again, and stood waiting with lowered eyes.

It was at this moment that Fabien returned. He heard two voices speaking at the same time:

"You must say good-bye to her, my boy."

"Fabien, are you going to let her turn me out?"

Both women had expected the young man to show signs of amazement and despair. But he was perfecly calm. Nothing of the torment in his heart showed upon his face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Would you believe it!" exclaimed Fanny, and her voice was hoarse. "Your poor mother's got to the point where she can't bear to have a divorced woman under her roof! . . . Really, that *is* a bit much!"

Madame Dézaymeries put a finger to her lips. Octavie had just come into the room to say that the bags had been brought down. Devoured by curiosity, alert to all that was going on, the old servant had left the door open and was hanging about the hall. Fabien, overcome by shyness, held out his hand to Fanny and withdrew it again rather too quickly. His eyes were dry. The traveller hurriedly fastened her coat and tied her veil. All she wanted now was to get away as soon as she could, away from Thérèse's pitiless face—away, especially, from the boy. What had his expression meant? Stupefaction or merely indifference? Indifference? Later that night, alone in her hotel bedroom, listening to the Christmas bells, she was to convince herself that his features, incapable of deception, had been eloquent, maybe of desire, but of repulsion, too, of disgust. At the moment of parting she could only blurt out:

"How I hate this religion of yours for coming between us. I would hate Him for coming between us—if He existed!"

She paused in the middle of her violent tirade, stretched her hands towards the door, and saw that Fabien was no longer there. His mother had told him to leave them, adding in a low voice:

"We shall not be going to Midnight Mass. We couldn't be in a proper state of mind after the horrible things that have been going on. Go to bed and forget what has happened."

Kneeling at her *prie-Dieu* with her face buried in her hands, she thrust her two thumbs into her ears that she might not hear the echo of that final blasphemy. Fanny gave one glance at the bent figure. Then, with one more insult, turned and left the room. For a moment she hesitated and sank down on the wood-chest in the hall. Within a cracked and frosted globe a gas-flame flickered. Then she got up and, without knocking, went into Fabien's room. A candle was burning on the night-table. The boy had sunk upon the bed, his face pressed into the pillow. At the sound of the door opening he turned his head and looked at her with sleepy eyes. Before he could do anything to defend himself, two hands had seized his face. He was conscious of a hesitating flutter of warm breath close to his lips, then, for a brief moment, his mouth was caught and held before, with a sudden burst of laughter, she left him.

Standing by the rumpled bed he listened to that wild sound of mirth receding, but did not hear the slamming of the front-door, nor yet the clatter of the departing cab, because the deep chime of the Cathedral bell was filling all the holy night.

He looked at his lips in the glass. He could taste on them the saltiness of blood.

IV

HALF-NAKED though he was, he flung the window wide and breathed in the misty air. It was as though he took pleasure in feeling the sharp teeth and relentless violence of the December night. Leaning out above the street filled with its hubbub of footsteps and laughter, he shivered. He made, as night be, a sporting bet with himself to endure as long as he possibly could the death-grip of the winter darkness. Only these gulps of icy fog, he felt, could wash him clean again. He scrubbed at his lips with his bare arm. But even while he was conscious of a sense of disgust, of a longing to wipe away a stain, he felt that the beasts and gods patterned by the stars were the only worthy witnesses of a revelation the memory of which burned him more fiercely than the night air froze. He strained his body towards the sky. It was a vessel still stoppered and inviolate, but the kiss that had caught him on the brink of sleep had, though almost imperceptibly, cracked the seal.

Illness followed hard upon that night—an attack of pleurisy which made him free of the glorious privileges accorded to those are who seriously sick, privileges that gave him the right to make no answer when he was spoken to; the right to sleep, or to pretend to sleep. He was blistered, and the pain revealed to him just how much agony the human body could endure. His mother being unable to stand the strain, a nun took over the nursing—a woman who was ageless, almost faceless, voiceless and anonymous. He revelled in the negative quality of her presence, in the crackling of her snow-white coif, in the sound made by her beads as she told them in the dark. One morning he looked in his mirror and saw the boyish fluff of beard, the large dark eyes such as the son raised from the dead must have fixed upon the widow of Nain. So rapid was his process of resurrection that in April he was passed fit for military service.

It was not worth while to return to the École des Chartes for three months only, so he stayed with his mother, who was oppressed with a feeling of guilt in giving herself so completely to the pleasure of having him there.

To all appearances no memory of Fanny remained. All the same, neither mother nor son could any longer live as though a storm had not threshed the grey waters of their quiet existence. Thérèse Dézaymeries imposed upon herself a more exacting penance. As soon as she had heard early Mass she went to the hospital and tended the aged cancer patients—because only children appealed to her, and because no form of disease caused her such acute disgust as cancer. Their only visitors were the occasional begging Sisters who rang at the door of this dwelling which was always dark on the hottest days, because the blinds were kept carefully drawn in order to exclude the perilous gaiety of the light. Fabien would watch the play of dusty sunbeams on the moist surface of his hand and sit dreaming of the shrill cry of swifts or the throaty cooing of doves on hot tiles.

In July the Dézaymeries went back to the country, to a country buried in sand as in penitential ashes, with the stripped pines standing up like so many living examples of martyrdom humbly endured. Fabien, who wanted to do his service in the cavalry, spent his time riding over the sandy roads. A patch of fog would hide a stretch of grassland from view. Sheep would be indistinguishable from the mist. The night smell of the fens lasted on into the dawn. He made no effort to struggle against the torpor of his mind and heart. He surrendered to it. Whenever he went he carried with him the climate of his soul. As, when a child tormented by evil thoughts, he had closed his eyes and driven them away with a shake of the head, so now he forbad himself to look for Fanny in his heart. Later, thinking back to this period of his life, he was to feel amazement that he had been served so well by this curious mood of apathy. At the age when passions riot and flourish, he had been caught up into regions where the atmosphere was so rarefied that his desires, unable to

breathe, had died. He scarcely fought against them at all, for there was no need for him to fight. His stainless life was no fruit of hard-won victory. He abandoned himself to a routine ot piety which touched his sensibilities not at all, but was wholly mechanical. With childlike obedience he followed the path marked out for him.

So reassuring was his behaviour that Madame Dézaymeries grew less watchful. She trusted him implicitly, and did not doubt that he had been signed, once for all, for salvation—that he was incorruptible. Perhaps, too, she was conscious of her powerlessness to break down the barrier of his silence and penetrate to the mind within. There was an unbridgeable gulf between them, each being of a different species, since each was of a different sex. But no matter how secret and puzzling the growth of the tree might be, she could see that it was beautiful. She could judge it by its fruit, and to her Christian heart the fruit was cause for rejoicing—for of what did it consist if not of spiritual humility, chastity, a willingness to work, and withdrawal from the world? How should she have realized that no love informed his attitude of submission? The spring of his nature had been coiled tight ever since his childhood days. It was to be expected that it should now show signs of slackening. But would not a day come when the solemn moments of the liturgical calendar would no longer find an echo in his heart? He might believe that he had banished Fanny from his mind, but in his flesh still lingered the memory of her fragrance, of the warmth of her breath. The expenditure of energy which he sought in his long rides through the woods was but the flight of Hippolytus wounded. The flies rose in a shimmer of sunlight from the peaty earth. They swarmed in a deadly cloud about his horse, making it sweat and bleed. He had to hurry home, and there, with his books, in the shuttered drawing-room, wait for evening to bring respite. At dusk the smoke from the farmsteads and the burned-up grass spread over the fields of rye. He loved the fields when they were stitched with shadow. There

had been, for as long as he could remember, a shortage of labour on the estate, and each year the forest had encroached a little further on the plough. The spaces of sky and open land grew ever narrower, and the dark ring drew tighter round the meadows. Perhaps, too, within himself the area of purity was insensibly contracting. But of this he was unaware, even during the years that he spent with the Dragoons at L. . . . The coarseness of his comrades alienated him by its very excess. He found nothing to attract him in the hotel bedrooms smelling of beeswax, leather and sweat, where a crowd of men and two women of the town sat pouring absinthe into the toilet-jug. And, if his landlord's eldest daughter kept the vases in his room filled with flowers, if she rose at dawn so that he might have a cup of steaming coffee before going on parade, if, one evening, wearing an imperfectly fastened dressing-gown, she hung about tidying his cupboard, if on the day he left the town for good, her face showed red with crying as she said good-bye—these symptoms of desire and sorrow had no effect on him. He did not so much as turn his head as he rode away, did not so much as spare a glance for the heart which burned for love of him.

He returned to the heath-country at the season when all work ceases, when the pines are left ungashed and no resin is collected because the wood-pigeons are on the wing. Even the shepherds drive their flocks from their accustomed pastures lest the bleating and the trampling and the sound of sheep-bells keep the shy birds from settling in the oaks.

On the first evening, Thérèse Dézaymeries took the bronzed face between her hands and looked long and hard into the eyes that made a show of smiling. But they quickly turned away. Dreams that she knew not of fought for concealment: desires lay hidden there like fish that darken the waters so that they may escape unseen. They took a turn together round the park. She did not ask him about his life in barracks, nor had he anything to tell her. They walked with their heads thrown back. Dreamily she murmured words that she loved to speak on their country

strolls: "Pine-forests—the only forests in which one can see the sky" . . . and, indeed, above their heads the tree-tops formed a vast tattered and swaying curtain through the holes in which they could catch sight of small patches of dark and shimmering blue. Mist rose from the stream and eddied about the fields through which it ambled lovingly, and the scent of wild mint struck through the wreathing vapour more powerfully than the smell of briars and resin and bruised leaves.

Thérèse Dézaymeries thought that Fabien's melancholy was but the brooding of a mind which finds God in the onset of the night. Next day he refused to go pigeon-shooting. He grumbled because the presence of the guns made riding impossible. Perhaps because he was unaided now by the terrific physical fatigue which had been his constant companion when in barracks, he turned in on himself, seeking an identity he could not find. The gestures and the prayers of former days seemed like the gestures and the prayers of someone else. The habits of body and mind which belonged to a youth that was his no longer he strove to force upon the stranger who now lived within him, a stranger to be dreaded, on whom he gazed with fear. He began to be conscious of an inner emptiness, or rather, of a feeling that he had been abandoned. And that, in itself, was a form of faith, because one cannot be abandoned except by somebody.

His mother hung about him continually, scanning his face, repressing certain thoughts that rose in her about his life at L. . . .

She wrote to her Spiritual Director:

"When he was a small boy I had only to take him on my knee. Not that he at once revealed the reason for his melancholy, but he was willing that I should probe his heart. He helped me in my search, and, when I had found the hidden thorn that irked him, ran away comforted. But he no longer believes that the old woman who bore him and nourished him, and gave him a second birth into the life of grace, can any longer supply the healing balm. Should I, do you think, ask more people to

the house? There are several families in the neighbourhood of more or less our own social standing, families with young girls. I don't want to, but I will if you say so. I remember reading in Pascal that marriage is the lowest of all Christian states, vile and unpleasing to God. How strongly I feel the truth of that! How convinced I am that the traffic of the flesh is a grim and filthy business. I long to say so to my child, who as yet, I am ready to swear, knows nothing of it. I sometimes wonder whether the passage through his life of that woman whose name I never mention has not, perhaps, left traces of trouble in his heart. His silence on the subject is far from reassuring. . . ."

The good Father advised that she should wait and watch: that she should be in no hurry to point the way to marriage (though it was very reprehensible on her part to espouse the derogatory views of a heretic on that great Sacrament). It was important to make quite certain, first of all, that Fabien had not been called to a higher destiny. "It might, perhaps, be no bad thing if the dear lad travelled for a while. Let him go to Umbria, to Rome especially. Those places will divert his thoughts, but piously. They may even bring him back by pleasant by-ways to that state of mind in which you, no less than I, desire to see him anchored."

When first she made the suggestion, and as she uttered the one word "Italy," Fabien felt the stranger lurking within him tremble with joy. With the same determination she had shown when formerly she had insisted on his settling in Paris, the good woman now pushed open the double door of this mysterious room. Pious hands drew him from the darkness and thrust him sharply into the arena where the fierce sun beats, and ever hungry beasts prowl up and down.

V

UMBRIA disappointed Fabien. The Christ of St. Damian who spoke to Il Poverello had no message for him. The sleeping face of St. Clare, and the veiled member of her Sisterhood who watched over her, did not stir his sleeping heart. Joyless, he tramped the road from Perugia to Spoleto by way of Assisi and Foligno, deaf to the fiery canticle addressed by Umbria to her brother the Sun. For him the dust of these highways held no trace of Francis, nor yet of Brother Leo, the little lamb of God. Why did he decide to make his way, not to Rome where he longed to be, but to Venice? Not chance, he thought, decides these things. Someone there must be who sets in motion the impulse buried deep within us. Another climate beckoned him. Until the moment of this journey the young man, unresponsive though he might be to the Holy Spirit, had at least been aware of Its presence. For years no inner tide had carried Fabien on its bosom: but he knew that He who did not draw him to Himself existed. In Venice this child of the Christian tradition was made for the first time aware of his lack of grace. He was alone. The sense of an infinite emptiness was revealed to him. His heart swelled. He knew the treacherous delights that are the mark of that terrible withdrawal. Abandoning his books and notes he wandered, unseeing, from museum to museum. He had no eyes for the sleeping St. Ursula as painted by Carpaccio, for the unsullied breeze that fills her room of slumber, for the day open on the darkness, for the angel who leaves untouched the things of every day—slippers, lamp, crown and the half-read page. He preferred the network of evil-smelling lanes, and, at dusk, those districts where languid voices whispered of proffered pleasures. The shoddy music of gay orchestras floating at night upon the Grand Canal in a mist of lanterns brought tears to his eyes. God had departed from him, though not yet did he know the true

meaning of solitude. He was like a frightened child whose father has let go his hand. He was fearful at being thus abandoned, yet revelled in his fear. A sense of pleasure caught him by the throat because, for the first time, he knew that he was vulnerable. To see himself exposed, like a virgin to the ravening beasts, was already a delight. He knew that sin, mortal sin, might pounce upon him now from the concealing thickets, and drive straight to his undefended heart. He turned his eyes upon the stranger that was himself, this new, this unsuspected being, whom Evil might possess. His defences were down. Nothing now stood between his fainting spirit and the vast abyss. He had a feeling of giddiness, and found in his awareness of it ecstatic pleasure. He would not go out of his way to provoke attack, he would take no chances. It was enough for him—a proffered victim, a willing prey—to taste the joy of expectation long drawn out. On the ferry-boats, at Florian's, in his hotel that looked on the Salute, the facile fumes of Asti kept the charm alive. Formerly, like all those whose thoughts are centred on the dialectic of the soul, he had been incapable of seeing anything save through mists engendered by a ceaseless meditation. Venice had the effect of dispelling the cloud. She laid her hand upon him, and his eyes were opened. For the first time faces stood out from the featureless mass around him. He saw them and he loved them. He was conscious, too, that his own face had become the focus for passing glances.

One evening, in the dining-room of his hotel, he felt irked by the fact that someone he did not know was staring at him. The importunate stranger was a big, sturdily-built man with prominent eyes of china-blue. He had the sparse fair hair and ruddy complexion of the north, the full-blooded cheeks produced by mists and alcohol. Facing him, with her back to Fabien, was a woman, and on his right sat a very young man who talked a lot and waved his arms. So high-pitched was his voice that, but for the gipsy band, Fabien could easily have heard what he was saying. He was not addressing his remarks

to the woman at his side, who, with back bent, shoulders hunched, and her elbows on the table, gave the effect of someone loosely sprawling. His thick black hair fitted close above his eyebrows like a cap. He had thick lips, and the blueness of his jowl was evidence of an exuberant growth of beard with which his razor fought a losing battle. He had quite forgotten to eat, and the gravy on his plate was fast congealing. He took some paper and a fountain-pen from his pocket and started to draw, making some remark as he did so that brought a smile to the lips of his red-faced companion. At that moment the waiter made as though to clear the table, and at once the young man flung himself upon the food before him and cleared his plate with the swiftness of a famished dog.

At length the three of them rose. The elder man, as soon as he got up, was seen to be a veritable giant. He might have been a Prince of some Scandinavian Royal House. The youth, whose length of body from shoulder to waist had, while he was sitting, given the impression that he was of about the same height, reached scarcely to his shoulder. Fabien had never seen anyone quite like him. He wore very tight trousers of light-coloured cloth which accentuated the abnormal development of his thighs, which might have been those of an acrobat. He made no attempt to give the woman precedence, but, with an air of cool insolence and a toothpick jutting from his mouth, made for the door, followed by the rubicund giant who once more stared at Fabien as he passed his table. Their companion stayed behind to drink a glass of water, and Fabien, who ever since the beginning of the meal had been eager to see her face, watched her intently. At last she turned round, and he recognized Fanny.

Only a paradox can express his feelings at that moment. He recognized her *although* she had not changed. The modern miracle which has given to women the seeming boon of eternal youth produces in some people, of whom Fabien Dézaymeries was one, a sense of terror and disgust. In these young women of fifty, preserved by some supernatural agency, the eyes alone are

eloquent of age. Only in them can be read the secret of a flabbiness that has its origin in the soul; only through them is made visible the wear and tear of the spirit. Fanny had remained so much the same that the effect was frightening. She looked as she had always looked, though the flood of time had swept her on, and each passing moment had marked her as with fire: five years of exigent desires and glutted senses, of lovers lost and lovers found, of passionate abandonments and bleak awakenings: five years of late nights, of endless cigarettes, of rich food, strong drink, narcotics and drugs. Yet there she stood, her young body apparently untouched by the passing of the years, strong as steel, tempered and hardened and possessed, Sin, in its way, is a form of life. There is such a thing as *infernal* Grace, and it can galvanize, just for as long as may be necessary, that adorable shape of moulded flesh which, according to St. Catherine of Siena, stinks in all its parts.

She filled her glass with water, sipped slowly until she had emptied it, took her bag which was hanging on the chair, and brushed by the young man without seeing him. She was wearing a dress of rose-coloured brocade cut in the prevailing Poiret fashion, and Turkish slippers slightly turned up at the toes. Her fragrance struck at Fabien, nor could he be sure whether it came from her body or from the long dead days that she had made to live again. He followed her into the hall. She was engaged in a lively discussion—though she kept her voice low—with the elder of the two men (no doubt, her second husband), whose ham-like face was distended in a grin. Meanwhile, the strange-looking youth, now wearing a felt hat and carrying a light overcoat on his arm and an ivory-knobbed cane in his hand, was giving instructions to the porter about forwarding his letters. He lit a cigarette, and then, presumably because the discussion was going on longer than he liked, said:

"Are your bags ready, Donald?"

The other man kissed Fanny's hand and went over to his companion. She remained standing where she was, struck rigid,

it seemed, with amazement, and with her eyes fixed on the revolving door. Fabien was gently swaying in a rocking-chair, but he finished his cigarette in a couple of minutes. He felt, from the way in which Fanny's two partners were casting sidelong glances at him, that he had been the subject of the recent conversation. He had no doubt at all that they had been talking of him. The younger of the two appeared to be countering some angry remark made to him by the red-faced man, who finally went up to Fanny again and asked her to go with him, for a moment, to his room. Without saying a word, she followed him to the lift. The youth called after them:

"Don't forget, Donald: we ought to leave here not later than a quarter past ten. The train goes at twenty to."

Donald nodded. His smile of assumed candour was horrible. He made a furtive movement of the hand in Fabien's direction.

Scarcely had the couple vanished from sight than the young man approached Fabien in a rather secretive manner and asked him for a light. As a cockchafer agitates its wing-cases preparatory to taking flight, he showed in a number of ways that he wanted to begin a conversation.

"It's really very hard, terrible, actually," he began at last, "to have to leave Venice in the autumn" (he spoke in a sing-song, and his r's rattled like a fall of pebbles). "No one ever *leaves* Venice, you know: they *tear* themselves away. To be in Venice is to live in an *embrace*."

Fabien smiled but said nothing. The other went on: "Don't you think so, *actually?* It certainly is so in my case, but perhaps you are here alone?"

Fabien felt obliged to nod. The creature before him assumed an air of disapproval and pity.

"Oh, but how *imprudent*! Alone in Venice! The Goddess of Love will punish you! To be alone in Venice is like—if you will excuse the simile—indulging in solitary vice!"

Fabien condescended neither to smile nor to make the slightest gesture. But the stranger obviously interpreted his silence as

evidence of interest, for he pointed with his cane at the revolving door.

"Over there stands the witness of many quite *terribly* sad deaths—I mean the Salute. *Actually*, no one could *possibly* reckon up all the young people who have drowned themselves from its steps. One of them was a *great* friend of mine—perhaps you have read some of his poetry?—just a *leetle* bit old-fashioned in manner, perhaps one might almost say *passé*, but then he was only seventeen, you see, and was quite unacquainted with modern art—all the same, he was a god, *actually*. It was the year I was dancing at the Fenice. . . ."

Fabien stared with amazement at this youth with the over-developed thighs. So that was it: he was a dancer! But still he said nothing. The stranger, after a quick glance at his wrist-watch, hurried on:

"I'm afraid my mind was wandering. You see, before I go I want to ask you whether you would take on a little mission—actually, that is just the word for it—something that will add a charming note of romance, a delightful *soupçon* of sentiment to your stay here. I won't ask whether you know me: I have, alas! to forgo the pleasures of anonymity. They have become quite impossible since the magazines of two hemispheres have taken to printing my portraits. . . ."

Fabien replied dryly that he never looked at magazines."

"But, my dear sir, do you mean, *actually*, that you have never seen a picture of Cyrus Bargues?"

Fabien remembered that he had seen the name on some poster or other advertising a season of exotic ballets. The dancer was staring at the imbecile who did not even know who he was!

"If you are not interested in art I very much doubt whether you will consent to undertake this mission which, on the strength of a first favourable impression, I had quite made up my mind to offer you. Your eyes, as you must often have been told, are quite *unique*."

Clearly, he must be a specialist in the matter of eyes, and

probably knew all about them as a collector knows all about, say, medals. The fire that glowed deep down in Fabien's held his attention so completely that he looked at least ten times at his wrist-watch without seeming to take in at all what its message was. But it was true that he was in a hurry. How could he manage, in the space of a few minutes, to convince this handsome, silent barbarian? Awkwardly, in a torrent of words, he delivered himself of the errand with which he had been entrusted.

"Donald Larsen, my impresario—yes, the tall man with the fair hair—has to go to Switzerland to make final arrangements about Leda Southers's engagement . . ."

"Leda Southers?"

So, actually, he'd never heard of Leda Southers! Why, with Leda and Cyrus Bargues what more could Larsen possibly ask for? He would have the finest ballet-company in the world!

"Don't you understand, it will be *immense*, there's no other word for it. . . . But, unfortunately, there is a woman in Donald's life—his wife, yes, the woman who was here a moment ago. . . ."

Again he looked at his wrist-watch, hesitated for a brief moment, looked at Fabien, saw that he was now eagerly listening, and grew bolder:

"D'you know, she followed us to Venice—we couldn't stop her—*actually* on the ground that Leda Southers had once been Donald's mistress!"

The trouble, he said, about Donald was that he wasn't ruthless enough. One couldn't cure him of being *sorry* for people.

"She keeps her hold on him by threatening to commit suicide. But I *did* get him to promise that he wouldn't take her to Switzerland with us. She keeps on saying that she'll kill herself—and he says she's quite capable of doing it. Personally, I make a point of pretending not to believe her. What *I* happen to know, though Donald doesn't, is that Fanny had arranged to meet a gigolo here—but he hasn't turned up. If only he'd come she'd be willing enough to leave us alone. . . . I think, perhaps, I ought

to explain that she *did* try to kill herself once, in Paris, but she didn't bring it off. . . ."

"Why are you telling me all these excessively grubby details?"

"You don't appear to be altogether indifferent to them."

Fabien got up, threw away the cigarette which he had only just lighted, took a few paces, and came back to his companion. He muttered, as though talking to himself, "So she tried to kill herself, did she?" So upset was he by what he had just heard that he was no longer listening to the dancer who seemed to be completely overcome by the rapid success that had attended his efforts.

"If I were the *patron*," he went on, "there wouldn't be all this shilly-shallying. After all, what *is* a woman, actually, I mean? One woman more or less in the world can't *really* matter, can it? I wish I could make you see how tremendously important this Swiss trip is. A ballet—how shall I put it?—a sort of cosmic, a sort of *geological*, ballet—which will express the awakening of primeval forces, the primitive *spark*, the first *distension* of matter by the impact of life."

His large nose twitched, his thick lips parted, so that his mouth looked like a bleeding gash in the rind of a ripe fruit. But Fabien had thoughts only for the great wind that had transported him far from the remote corner of heath and pine, from the desert in which he had been born, to this coast where Fanny, old now and soiled by life, had looked for death—for eternal death. . . . Surely it could be no chance meeting? Must he, then, risk damnation that she might be saved? No . . . no. . . . It was no longer a matter of flesh and grace in conflict. The two all-powerful forces would work, now, in close alliance for the salvation of a woman's body, a woman's soul.

"So now, my dear sir, you know that there is in this hotel a lonely woman whom I may, perhaps, be allowed to describe as a professional suicide. Let me repeat what I have told you once already—that she has made one attempt, and failed. It is madness on our part to throw her at your head like this, but we have

no alternative—you do realize that, don't you? Maybe you like women of her peculiar type? You can save her at very small cost to yourself. All you have to do is to hand her back to Donald when he returns. He doesn't *want* to lose her, you know. She's got—how shall I put it—a wonderful nose for picking up a good thing, for finding budding geniuses. You should see the pictures and the lacquer she's got in Paris."

He took Fabien's arm and gave it a farewell squeeze. But Fabien stood perfectly still, gazing at the lift.

"There she is . . . promise me . . ."

With the faintest flicker of his eyelids Fabien conveyed consent. The bell-boy emerged with the bags, followed by Larsen, who, in his travelling ulster with its fur collar, looked larger than ever. Fanny brought up the rear. While Cyrus Bargues was speaking in a low voice to the impresario, the latter kept his eyes fixed on Fabien. The giant paused for a moment in the door of the hotel, turned once more to Fanny and wagged his finger, as one might do to a child when conveying a parting "Be good." For the last time he shot a brooding look at Fabien: for the last time the little dancer grinned. . . . Then Fabien, conscious that there was nothing now to retrain him, went across to the woman who was still standing motionless, gazing at the door, touched her on the shoulder, and said quite simply:

"Fanny!"

VI

FOR a second or two she failed to recognize him: then she uttered a faint cry:

"You! . . . here in Venice, you, Fabien!"

She raised her face to his, careless of the danger she ran in thus displaying its mask of paint and powder in the harsh light of the hotel hall. But tears had seamed the mask and broken its surface.

Suddenly her gaze expressed nothing but the dull amazement of a woman brought in an instant face to face with a miracle, not believing what she sees before her, denying the evidence of her own eyes.

"You here. . . You here!"

Hurriedly he began to speak of his mother, of Joseph, striving to build up a façade of meaningless detail. She only said again, "You here!" She had been on the point of dying from starvation, and here, suddenly, was this large, warm loaf within reach of her hand, within reach of her mouth. Just as the anchor had been raised, the last mooring-rope loosened; just as the ship was beginning to move out to the dim, dark distance, he who was the furthest from her in space and time, he, this great archangel, had turned up beside her.

She glanced round the hall. Yes, she was really awake. Two porters were quarrelling over a tip. Some Americans were talking with a nasal twang that made them sound like gramophone records.

"Come with me . . . away from this light . . . come!"

She had thrown a coat over her shoulders and now moved away, drawing Fabien after her. The grip of her hand on his arm was that of a drowning woman. The mingled smell of ooze and musk, the confused odours of scented cigarettes and marshland, the wavering reflexions of green and red cast by the lanterns in the dark water—all these things that, but a moment before, had seemed the forerunners of death now suddenly and for ever became part and parcel of her frantic joy. This harbour whence ships sailed out into the great nothingness had, in a moment, taken on the appearance of some brightly lit scene set for the action of her happiness. She understood nothing of the broken, stammered phrases in which Fabien was taking terrified refuge from the threat of silence. She had ears only for his voice, for the fresh, male voice of this child-man, and hugged it to her heart.

They crossed the Piazetta and walked along the quays. They

had to take very short steps because of the narrow skirt of her brocaded dress. And what of him? He knew that now at last he had stepped across the forbidden threshold. After all these years, here he was on the other side—but whether dead or alive he did not know. What was this happiness the mere approach of which set his heart swelling and transfigured all the world around him?

"Fanny, what has happened to you?"

Such was the first tiny phrase he uttered in the language of this unknown land into which he was striding so incautiously. It was Fanny now who was talking, he who, without understanding what he heard, was listening to her rather throaty voice. She was confessing that someone she had thought to be her friend, someone to whom she had cried aloud in her distress, had not come. But how sweet now seemed that treachery, how sincerely she rejoiced in the thought of that abandonment! Now and again she stopped in the middle of her flow of words.

"How can I dare to say all this to you who are so innocent?"

He was still for her the Fabian Dézaymeries whom she had known of old—the simple, unspoiled schoolboy. She had opened the lovely book at the page she had been reading when she closed it. The old frank laugh rang out again for a moment as she said:

"Are you still as religious as ever? This meeting has altered my views of Providence."

Unknown to her the fruit had been ripening just when the pangs of thirst were most intense. Something told her that this soul was utterly defenceless—that at the very first assault she could possess it. The young victim lay trembling beneath her hand, unarmed, with no power to resist, already drunk with the fumes of defeat. Time, in her absence, had brought to maturity the seed that she had sown within his heart, and now she had returned at the very moment of harvest.

Standing beneath a street lamp, she opened her black silk bag. Fabien saw the glint of a tiny revolver.

"You are the only person in the world who could have held

me back from the last fatal leap—the only one, and you were so far away. And now you're here, you're here!"

Her hand touched his hair, stroked the rough surface of his cheeks. Using a shop-window as a mirror, she powdered her face and reddened her lips, like an actress putting a few finishing touches to her make-up before going back upon the stage. Then, in the narrow entry of a deserted café, she clung to Fabien, burying her face in his shoulder as might a child who has found sudden respite from its misery. He noticed then that the cheeks of women who have been crying have the smell of wet earth.

She laughed, and her voice was bruised by the violence of the sobs she had been choking back. Once more she took him in her arms. Thus did she wreak her vengeance on Thérèse Dézaymeries! Driven from her friend's house, she had crept back by way of Fabien's heart. Soon she would dominate his body, too. If only Thérèse could have seen them! She laughed through her tears. Not yet was she quite ripe for death. Once more she would see the morning sun drench with flame the tumbled bed. The fledgeling she had hatched, the young creature who for her alone had grown to manhood, trembled.

To them, snared in the enchantments of the body, the echoes of the city's life reached as a medley of mere sound, void and meaningless: music and the sound of laughter, footsteps on the flagstones of the quay, the plash of wavelets and the susurration of ships' prows cleaving the waters of the lagoon. Deeper and deeper did Fabian drive his way into the revealing night—from evening until dawn, and through the day that followed it, a day of rain when the hotel was filled with the whisper of steps in every corridor and the muted playing of an orchestra. Beneath the stirring of his breath a woman was coming back to life. She said to him:

"I hang upon your breath. . . ."

To-morrow, doubtless, the time would come to make a reckoning. To-morrow he must descend into the arena and count the bodies of the slain. He must measure the extent of

harvest fields flattened by this storm of hail, calculate the miles of virgin forest burned to ashes by this fire.

At length, but half alive, they left the room, and Atilio, the gondolier, steered them, as the whim took him, by the rioting green of walls from which the autumn leaves were falling. At the hour of the siesta they landed on the island of San Franceso del Desertio. A friar, his eyes puffy with sleep, half opened the wicket-gate, and they caught a glimpse of cloisters, of a well-head, and, against the dazzling blue, of a single cyprus. Then the door was closed against the guilty couple. The clack of sandals died away and was lost in the silence of drowsiness and prayer. On another occasion a flicker of flames lit up for them the golden glints within the dark basilica of Padua, where, to a murmured hymn, the monks were bearing in procession a great bleeding Christ. On the empty Lido sands innumerable bathing huts drawn up in rows told more surely of approaching winter than did the arrow-shaped flight of birds migrating. From all the campaniles sounded the evening prayer for grace, and from an acquiescent sky there fell an absolution on the fleet of gondolas and all their loads of sin. Fabien, erect at the centre of this burning, fiery furnace, knew that behind them a threat of storm was mounting, accumulating all the arrears of a fearful debt. Without a halt, without so much as pausing to take breath, he was descending an endless flight of stairs in a giddiness of lusts repeatedly renewed, of rending sensations, of the gloomy stupor of satiety. But had he ever imagined, for a moment, what he would find at the bottom of that long descent? Suddenly the rain had come, transforming Venice to a great mist of moisture. The radiators gurgled and gave out a smell of hot painted metal that filled the room's disorder of woman's clothes and books and bottles. Watchful and experienced, Fanny looked for the first signs of weariness upon the thin-drawn face, beneath the mournful eyes. She began to talk about going home. Fabien was like a man waking from a heavy sleep. The course of the descent was broken, and, on the landing where he rested, he knew that

Someone waited. For years he had lived a life of chastity and religious devotion, feeling that presence only as something still far off. But now, after a strange and errant course, after treading the winding ways of an exquisite guilt, he felt upon his face the very breeze and breath of condemnation.

But it was on the journey home, especially, imprisoned in their sleeper where he had to submit to the experience of feeling shut in, of knowing that he could not get away, that he realized with astonishment how strangely his long fall had ended. The pleasures of the flesh that blunt so many hearts, had restored to his a mystic sensibility. His mistress was there with him in all the vulnerable intimacy of proximity. Never had they spent so long a time together, never had they seen one another so clearly, as during those long and gloomy hours between Venice and Paris. For hitherto their love had been a bird of darkness. Deep in himself, but very far removed, he felt the presence of that Being whom he had betrayed—while here, within touching distance of his hand, within the very radius of his breathing, was, all the while, this ageing partner of his sin. The further the train travelled from the sun, the heavier lay the autumn's wounding hand upon the forests. Great flocks of crows swooped down upon the stubble fields. Fanny was smiling at the thought of winter now close at hand—of that season when lovers in the languor of their satisfied desires hear the patter of drops upon the windows, the sighing of the wind, when, deep in a room drowned in the Paris rain, the clock ticks on its empty reckoning of a life where time means nothing.

In the dining-car she discussed practical details. Fabien must move from his hotel. She knew of a ground-floor flat in the rue Visconti. Would he let her furnish it for him? Everyone in Paris admitted that she had a "gift" for that sort of thing. And it would really be doing her a service; she had a perfect mania for picking up bargains.

"I don't know where to put all the stuff I've got."

Her dear, scatter-brained darling, for whom the outside world

scarcely existed, wouldn't, would he—she asked—mind if now and then a chair was spirited away? There are some things one keeps for years, others that one gets rid of in a week.

But Fabien was not listening. His whole mind was bent on the idea of escape.

"You'll come and see me often, won't you? What a sensation you'll be, my tiger-cat! You care so little about art, and certainly Thérèse was the last person in the world capable of teaching you to appreciate beautiful things. She's always had an instinctive love of the ugly. But then, of course, ugliness is a matter of principle with her. I know you're intelligent, but not in matters of that kind."

He broke in on her talk with a harsh gesture, furious that she should have dared to speak of Madame Dézaymeries. She fell silent, quick to notice the dark mood that cast a shadow on her loved one's face. She was no longer intent on changing Fabien. Her knowledge of men made her realize that he would be quite unresponsive to any such attempt. It was simply a question for her of taking him as he was, of drawing him to her with all his heavy load of torment, credulity and remorse. In their early days together she had tried to win him by pretending to be attracted by his metaphysical dreaming. But he had eluded her every attempt to broach the subject. It was as though he had a horror of hearing words he held sacred spoken by lips like hers. Within the little mahogany box of their sleeper Fanny set herself to read the formidable language of his face, to interpret the meaning of his every silence. She guessed that he was longing to escape, and trembled when she heard his somewhat theatrical reply to what she had just been saying:

"There will be no place for me in your house. Do you really think that I am prepared to accept every extreme of marital forbearance?"

With his mind on Donald Larsen he added: "From now on he is a co-conspirator with us."

With a gesture that she knew well, of the meaning of which

she was only too conscious, he buried his face in his hands. She was caught by sudden panic. To-morrow morning, in the shoddy dawn of the Gare de Lyons, would she not see him vanish, disappear for ever? Had the time come to play her last card, that threat of suicide which still worked with her wretched husband? She had no idea how a young Christian would react to it, so unfamiliar was she with the type. Might it not be that he would accept his mistress's damnation with a light heart?

A railway official entered to prepare their beds and dim the light. Fabien sought the solitude of the corridor, where he stood with his forehead pressed to the rain-drenched window. A few paces off, Fanny watched him. To-night the noise made by the train as it rushed through unknown stations struck a note of torment to the very heart of their love-making. It was as though, in a desperate heroism, they had mingled their bodies on the edge of an eternal nothingness.

VII

FANNY had to play her hand, at first, very carefully. The young man, ever ready to take fright, refused absolutely to live anywhere but in the hotel in the rue de Vaugirard to which he had grown accustomed. Every other day he met his mistress in a ground-floor flat in the rue Visconti, where the only permanent piece of furniture seemed to be the divan bed, where the chairs and screens that stood about the room changed continually. From each of these trysts he emerged so exhausted, so melancholy and so resentful, that she was left with a feeling that she would never see him again. But always he was the first to arrive, impatient to perform the act for which he had come. From this she drew no favourable omen: 'He enjoys it, that's perfectly clear . . . but the chief reason is that he fears I will kill

myself if he plays me false.' She was for ever alluding to the possibility of her death: the subject, in fact, had become a perfect mania with her, and the glint of the revolver still showed whenever she opened her bag. It wasn't that she wanted to exert any kind of emotional blackmail on him, but that, as she confessed, nothing gave her such a thrill as the feeling that she was all the time playing a dangerous game with fate.

"I used to be a terrible gambler, darling; but what's money, after all? What I need to-day is the knowledge that the stake is living flesh and blood, that I'm playing for *you*! I've put everything on you, and, when all's said and done, it's only my own life that's in the balance."

She had not as yet ventured to invite him to the Quai Debilly, though she would never really be at rest until he was breathing the air that she habitually breathed, until she could feel that he was continually within her reach. How happy, therefore, it made her to discover that the thought of her unknown life apart from him caused him acute suffering—that he was actually jealous of the woman from whom he longed to be delivered. To his first clumsy questionings she replied quite simply that her life was an open book:

"When you see the kind of people, my dear, among whom I spend my time, you'll stop worrying. Artists are all very well for casual conversation or business deals, but when it comes to love! . . ."

Fabien emitted one of those bursts of frank laughter which he never, except on rare occasions, succeeded in controlling. They always gave the impression that some vast reserve of youth and happiness within him had come suddenly to the boil.

At first he hovered uncertainly upon the frontiers of her strange kingdom, fearful, as in his native heaths, of venturing on to squelching bogs. Nothing that he now did showed any eagerness to escape. The trapped animal, after his first violent struggles, has a way of staying motionless for so long that he produces the illusion of death. Knowledgeable and patient, she

had finally succeeded in enveloping him completely. In his moments of satiety he thought: 'I'll run away from all this grubby playing ground, from all this filth of mind and body'; but then desire would stir in him again. At Fanny's parties he was most commonly to be seen leaning against a doorway and saying nothing. The other guests were as strange to him as the members of some savage tribe. He wandered among them, a melancholy Gulliver, the prisoner of an unknown race. The talk was all of the impending return of Donald Larsen and of Cyrus Bargues, who was at present dancing in London. He was bewildered by the incomprehensible pictures on the walls, and by the music, which sounded to him like recurrent blows with a fist. There was no sign of servants, and at supper-times the guests helped themselves. Under the influence of drink masks did, to some extent, fall, but there was always one still clamped to each face. Had he been able to tear it away what raw wound would have been revealed? What was this leprosy he could not see though it stank in his nostrils? At first he felt humiliated when he heard for the first time the name of some musician who was, according to Fanny, the most renowned in Europe, of some poet, of some collector. He suffered agonies when his was the only solemn face while all around the company was doubled up with mirth. . . . But the jokes were all about people he did not know, and the jargon, with its indirect references and implications, was like a foreign language to him. This was a world of which his intelligence had not the freedom. He stood in it like a blind man at a firework display. He could hear the "Ah!'s" of the crowd, the banging of the rockets, but not a glimmer of light reached him through the darkness.

These Philistines had begun by laughing at him, as at some Samson cropped and weaponless. In confidential whispers and at a safe distance (for he looked a tough customer) they exchanged pleasantries on the subject of his presence there among them. But of all this he seemed to be completely unaware, seemed not even to notice how the women sniffed round his body. In the

noisy din of the supper table he had ears only for the soughing of his native forests under an autumn rain. The air might be shrill with the voices of ageless women in backless dresses, but what he heard was the sound of pigeons swooping to roost among the oaks. He could catch the wildness of the wind driving the rain against the windows of the nursery where his brother had breathed his last. From far back (and herein lay the secret of his taciturnity) he had, though he did not know it, been oppressed by a grievance against his mother caused by her inflexible austerity, and unconsciously he accused her of painting the world black and showing life in nothing but gloomy colours. But he knew now that the world is a place of leprosy, that life is the home of death. He could see, he could feel, the canker at the hearts of all these people. He was terrified by the stench of his own rottenness. It was true, perhaps, that his mother, under the influence of her own Jansenist upbringing and of a slightly warped vision, had been guilty of distorting the doctrines of her faith: yet, compared with what he saw about him, how right she had been! Though he might entirely fail to understand the poetry, the painting, the music which those around him seemed to admire so much, he could not help feeling that the men responsible for these things had, maybe, employed their art in the creation of a universe of monsters with the object of being able to move among them unnoticed. Was it not true to say, he thought, that their art was the visible form of their despair?

Why, then, did he not profit from the violent shock administered to him by this back-firing of sin? Why, then, woken by the thud of his fall, did he not take to his heels? If only he could turn to account the sense of horror that pressed so close upon satiety. . . . But Fanny would kill herself. He alone it was who stood between her and the abyss: he was her sole defence against that will to death which kept on coming to the surface of her mind. There were moments when he felt ashamed of his secret wish that she would act upon it. If only she would get out of his life, if only she would vanish for ever, if only this

torment of his existence would cease, leaving him like a garden with a fresh patina of green after the hail had passed! Why should the weary be refused the boon of sleep? But he did not believe that death was sleep. He believed only in an eternity of rest or punishment—in an ineffable Presence for ever there, or for ever absent. He believed that absence and presence are the two contrasted aspects of eternity—that there is no third possibility, no refuge for those who, having been the enemies of God and man alike, long only for the dark and nothingness.

VIII

IN the rainy dawn, as he stood waiting for the door to be opened, Fabien saw, on the pavement opposite, a number of shadowy figures pass one by one through the half-opened wicket of the Carmelite chapel where the bell was calling to early Mass. He dreaded lest one of them should turn its head and, with face suddenly displayed, smile with his mother's eyes and lips. He climbed his staircase, which was misted with the stale smell of yesterday's food. The boots standing outside the doors told mute stories of laborious lives. A telegram was lying on his table. Just as he was about to open it, he remembered that it was the anniversary of Joseph's death.

Memorial service for Joseph Thursday ten o'clock. Expecting you.

He must get off at once, before he might have to fight his way through Fanny's entreaties! Hurriedly he packed a bag and scribbled a note for his mistress. Might not this be the prelude to final and permanent escape? Here was one of those chances that he could not possibly have engineered. His own choice, his own will, had had nothing whatever to do with it. Someone was

taking a hand in his life. Someone, perhaps, was concerned about his destiny. It was beyond his power *not* to take the train, *not* to feel his mother's arms about him, *not* to press with his knees the oblong of sand under which his brother slept, *not* to plunge into that atmosphere which death creates, with which he had always tended, since the days of his childhood, to saturate his mind. He began to suffer when, with nothing left to do, he sat waiting in his room until it should be time to start for the station. Suddenly he felt that he would like to say a prayer for the dead boy. Between his brother and himself there lay a solid block of sin—no life-giving corn crop but a foul, luxuriant weed. He could, of course, still pray, but of what avail were prayers uttered from such unholy depths? With the tears streaming down his face, he could do no more than speak the first verse of the *De Profundis: Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord!* . . . Shivering, he repeated the words: out of the depths! out of the depths!—and seemed to catch the muffled, despairing notes of his mother's voice far away in the country cemetery. . . . Polluted as he was, what could he do for his dead brother?

A cab took him on the first stage of his journey, then the train, in which he sat shut in with himself. Later, just as darkness was falling, in the city where he had been born, he took another train that would carry him on to the heaths and forests. He had to change once more, this time in a deserted station where he waited for two hours under the stars. The country of his earliest years came out to meet him. Dense walls of pine were already closing in on him, and in his nostrils was the familiar smell of marshy fields and turpentine. Not only in space had he left Fanny far behind: he had travelled back through time to the lost innocence of the dead years.

He was surprised to find how much younger his mother looked, as a result of living alone. She seemed thinner, gentler, less shut away on the barren heights of authority. At first they talked of Joseph.

"The poor boy offered up to God each moment of his final

agony," she said. "His faith was without blemish, and so, too, was his innocence. But which of us can stand without fear before the Judgment Seat? Which of us can be sure that he is justified in the eyes of the Almighty?"

Fabien recognized her old familiar tones—but it seemed now as though she were speaking the words from force of habit, merely. They were no longer in accord with a heart that was now like earth which has been softened by the rain.

When they got back from the cemetery he found a letter from Fanny. She had disguised her handwriting on account of Thérèse. The envelope felt heavy, and he dreaded to find within pages and pages filled with supplication. He walked down alone to the little stream. The frosty grass wetted his shoes. He could hear the sucking sound of mud beneath his feet. From the letter came the smell that impregnated everything that Fanny touched. He was amazed that her scent should reach even into this country solitude, forcing its presence on the grassy void. The icy current, exposed now to the full light of day, flowed on beneath bare alders and between dead briars. A woodcock flew from a thicket, swift and heavy on the wing. The water had seeped into the holes made by rooting wildboar. He heard the screaming of a sawmill, and it seemed to him as though the pine trunks were crying aloud in their agony. Without even opening the letter, he tore it into tiny scraps which soon the streamlet mingled with its frothy scum.

He went back to his mother and had, at once, a feeling that she was about to wield the probe. She said that the curé would be celebrating Mass at seven o'clock.

"To-morrow morning we shall be able to take Communion together in Joseph's memory. I have told the curé that you may wish to make your confession first."

She was arranging his inner life for him with that artless determination which she had shown when he was twelve years old. In his reply, he was moved less by anger than by the desire

to start a quarrel (thereby making it possible to escape without rousing her suspicions).

"You forget how old I am, mother. It was no part of my intention to take Communion here."

She could not understand him, was voluble in protest. How could he not wish to do as she had suggested? He knew what value the intentions of the living have for the dead. . . . She could hardly believe that he would wish to deprive his brother of such aid. She spoke just as she had always done. It did not seem to occur to her that he might be different from the little pious boy he once had been, from the youth so strong in chastity. Suddenly worried, she turned her face to him, all drawn and tear-stained with the day's emotions. She was a million miles away from suspecting anything wrong in her son's conduct. What she dreaded much more was that his faith might be passing through a crisis. She had heard priests talking about new intellectual theories, about forms of heresy against which even the sacerdotal mind might not be wholly proof. Dryly, he cut her short.

"At least, my boy, set my mind at rest by telling me that your faith is unshaken?"

He begged her not to worry. She could be easy, he said, on that score. If he possessed any certainty in the world it was the one that she had given him as a child. Now that he was grown up he had received ample confirmation of it.

She embraced him with a fervour that was unusual in her. But all that evening there was silence between them, and he, sitting with a book and pretending to read, could feel her eyes upon him. Nevertheless, they prayed together, and he felt as though he were no more than twelve and that his brother was close beside him, kneeling by the bed, his face buried in the counterpane. As of old, the words sounded muffled because Madame Dézaymeries kept her hands over her face. He found himself remembering a certain evening when, while his mother prayed, he had heard the sound made by Fanny as she turned the pages of a book, sitting by the fire, an exile from this act of family

worship. He had, he recollected, twisted his head round and watched the young woman dangling a heelless velvet slipper from her toe. She had been stroking her cheek with an ivory paper-knife, and smiled at the pious boy with a look of tender mockery.

He made no attempt to persuade his mother to join him in Paris. "It would be yielding to a weakness," she said . . . but she spoke in the tone of one whose dearest wish it is to yield. "It is just because," she went on, "I want it so much that I must give up the idea of such a trip." In the old days, when she had refused to take a proffered chance of happiness she had wasted no words on the matter. But now, in her softened, unfamiliar mood of loneliness, she added: "I don't seem, nowadays, to be able to live without you."

Fabien could think of nothing to say except "You must do what seems most sensible to you." The words were deceptive, but she would not let herself believe that they contained a hidden meaning. More than once she directed the conversation in such a way that he might return to the charge and spirit her off to Paris in spite of herself—but he said nothing. Until the very last evening she hoped that he would force her to go against her will, would take pity on her overpowering desire, would play an active hand in the sweet plot.

He left before dawn. His mother, with her hair down, and wearing a black dressing-gown, stood by the kitchen range and watched him eat. "You're still here," she said, "but this evening you'll be in Paris," and she stroked his forehead and his cheeks as she never would have done when he was small. A farm hand came to carry down the bags. He had a lighted lantern, but put it out. The sky showed white in the puddles of the road. Factory sirens were calling men to work. The pines, with their branches spread wide like crosses, stood drowned in mist. The dawn sky looked as though it had been dragged down to meet their upward thrust and now engulfed their crests so that they were invisible to the resin-drawers busy at their work of enlarging the gashes in the trunks.

That evening, at the d'Orsay station, lost in the anonymous crowd lining the barrier, Fanny scrutinized the grubby faces of the travellers as they came up the stairs. Fabien always took his time. What message would she read in his eyes? His running away without seeing her again, his failure to answer her letter, had inclined her to expect the worst. The dead brother, she had felt, the gloomy heaths, the remorseless mother, would all have been in league against her. Then, that morning, a telegram had come telling her that he was on his way back, and she had begun to hope again. She felt the agonizing thrill of the gambler as she told herself that at any moment now she would know whether what lay before her was death—or life. Suddenly he appeared—the youngest member of all this dusty crowd, and, while he was still some distance from her, smiled. They did not even touch hands, but beneath his gaze she felt herself trembling with happiness. In the car it was he who first kissed her in the hollow of her neck. She said that she would go with him only as far as the door of his hotel. She must hurry back because of the girl.

"What girl?"

"Why, the girl I wrote about in the letter which you never answered. Donald brought her back with him from Brussels, where he's staying on for a few days. He'll be back this evening . . . you'll meet him. It'll all go off splendidly, you see if it doesn't."

He was afraid she might notice the wave of hot colour that suddenly flooded his cheeks. He saw in imagination the torn scraps of the letter he had not read mingling with the scum of a moorland stream. He was prudent enough to let Fanny do the talking.

"I explained that it was Donald's darling daughter. I've found out since that he had a boy, too, by Leda Southers—think of it, he's ten years old! Naturally, he's his favourite. But he seems very proud of this Colombe of his. . . . What an idea, giving a girl a name like that—Colombe!"

"There was a parish of Sainte-Colombe quite close to where we used to live."

"Listen, darling. I've got to take the child to a concert this evening in the Champs-Élysées. Why not join us?"

He said that it wouldn't be quite the thing for him to go to a public entertainment so soon after the anniversary of his brother's death. She burst out laughing. That must be another of Thérèse's ideas!

"My dear, only fools regard music as an entertainment. It's when I'm suffering most that I find I can't do without it. . . ."

She broke off, surprised that he did not protest, as he usually did whenever she brought Thérèse Dézaymeries into the conversation. Instead, he snuggled up against her like a little boy.

"You've no idea how *beastly* I was to mamma. . . . She was longing for me to bring her back. She just waited and waited for a word or a sign . . . and I was so frightened! It's horrible of me, because I do really love her. It's awful to think that now, when we've got such a short time in which we might be together, I can't bear the thought of having her with me. It's as though I were wishing she were dead. . . ."

"What big words! Don't be a little silly, my dear. All it means is that you're twenty and that you don't want your years of youth to be buried alive. . . ."

She followed him up the hotel's evil-smelling stairs. She loved, even more than the flat in the rue Visconti, this squalid room into which Fabien so seldom let her come. It was rich with the day-to-day animal smell of his presence. It was a constant joy to her to wash her hands with his used cake of soap, and dry them on the towel dirtied by his razor. Ever since the day when she had laid her cheek on the rough surface of his bolster and he had violently pulled her away, she loved to sit on the iron bedstead, the student's bedstead, the bedstead that, for her, was forbidden ground.

"Your youth does not wish to be buried alive. As somebody—I forget who—once said: Let the dead bury their dead."

"You're right, my sweet, it is better for the dead to stay with the dead. . . ."

The tone of his voice had changed. She dared not switch on the light, imagining the sudden look of desperation that had come to his face in the darkness.

"You know how fond I was of your poor mother. She drove me from the house, I know . . . but she's only got to hold out her arms. . . . All the same, darling, look at the existence she leads—her attitude of refusal to life."

"And how, may I ask, do you define life?"

"Life is love: my love. At least, that's the only thing I've ever expected of it, and I certainly have found it."

"More than once?"

Momentarily abashed, she took his hand:

"Often it was the shadow only. But even when you were little more than a child, I loved you. Once one has found the real thing, it doesn't matter, does it, how often one has been deceived? Your mother has never had anything. I wish you could know what her attitude to your father was—quite, quite too extraordinary! . . . Anyone looking at her now would take her for an old maid, don't you think so? I don't mean that as an insult, Fabien, but really no one would ever think that she had had children. That hard face of hers . . ."

She was afraid that he might turn on her in anger, but he gave no sign that he had taken her words in ill part. He merely said:

"You've never seen her face, have you, when she thinks no one is looking? There are days when she comes back after Mass, from the Calvary."

"What's the Calvary?"

"A hospital where she goes twice a week to look after the cancer patients. She looks positively radiant, then, I swear she does. . . . I think her face on those occasions is the only face in which I have ever seen real joy. . . ."

"When I am in your arms, Fabien, what do you see in *my* face?"

He replied that he had never dared to look at it.

"That, dear love, is because my joy is so terrible that it frightens you. I, too, know what joy means, *I* have had experience of it . . . of joy . . . of joy . . . of joy! . . ."

Her voice as she repeated the word grew harsh. Her face looked ugly because she was puckering up her eyes in an effort to keep back the tears. Fabien sat down on the bed and took her in his arms like a child. She lay sobbing against his shoulder.

As he was being driven to the theatre, he thought: 'Yes, let the dead bury their dead.' He was surprised to find that he was feeling happy, perhaps because he had forced Fanny to confess her wretchedness, perhaps because at last he had made his choice, and had consented to be numbered among the dead.

In Fanny's box there was one other woman. He ought to have known her but had to be freshly introduced. He never recognized women. He was fond of saying that every new dress is a disguise, and that there is no end to this playing of variations on the theme of clothes.

"And this is little Colombe, about whom I was speaking to you."

A young, decidedly tall girl rose awkwardly from her seat and held out a gloved hand (she had on the only pair of long gloves to be seen in the theatre). Fabien thought her ugly but odd. His seat was behind hers. She must have scrubbed her neck with a rough towel, because the delicate skin showed red. Her hair had been dragged back so that it left, fully exposed, two tiny ears, the lobes of which looked flushed and swollen.

"They taught her to wear her hair like that at the convent," Fanny said to the strange woman. "Of course, it looks very ridiculous to us, but we should think it rather attractive if it happened to be the fashion, as it may well be, soon."

Fabien addressed himself to the girl: "Have you been living in a convent?"

Without looking at the young man, she said that she had been brought up by the Ladies of X . . . in Belgium—and then pre-

tended to read her programme, wrinkling her nose and letting a little frown of concentration appear between her rather Chinese-looking eyebrows, which Fabien decided were distinctly comic. Her voice, too, was comic. Suddenly she raised her face, threw a quick glance at Fabien, blushed a deep scarlet, and then looked down into the auditorium, where the orchestra was "tuning up." Finally she enquired whether the concert had begun. He replied, meaning to make her laugh, that with "this sort of music" one could never be sure. But she did not laugh. Instead, she examined the conductor with great care, after which she turned to Fabien and said with extreme seriousness:

"No, they've not begun yet."

This childlike simplicity made him feel very happy. He found in it a satisfaction at once poignant and tender. He had the whole evening before him in which to look at her neck. It was long, and reminded him of a pouter-pigeon—which exactly suited her name, for was she not called Colombe, Dove, Pigeon? Fanny had mentioned her in the letter which, at this very moment, must be eddying to and fro on the weedy surface of the stream. It pleased him to think that he had mingled the name and the image of this unknown child with the fresh flow of water which must now be shimmering beneath the moon, and, swaddled in mist, filling the darkness with its chaste murmurings.

"It's over!"

She had turned to him with an expression of infantile relief. She moved her arms and legs. A couple of sweets produced sudden bulges in her cheeks. She thought it wise of Fabien not to take any because "they stick to one's teeth so."

Fanny was staring through her opera-glasses. "Look at Coco and the Princess down there in the stalls," she said to the strange lady. "They don't see us, but they can feel they're being looked at. We really must go down and say 'hullo.' . . . You won't mind, Fabien, will you?"

They pressed past him, plump and powdered. He breathed in their scent. He exchanged smiles with the young girl, wondered

what he could find to say to her, and finally asked whether she was enjoying Paris.

"I'm frightened of people."

Her answer delighted him. He said he could see that she was still a *wild* pigeon, and that she ought really to have been called *Pa*lombe.

"It was mamma who wanted to call me Colombe, because in the town where she was born there was a parish where they used to have a procession in honour of Sainte-Colombe, and she played the part of the saint. I've seen a photograph of her holding a palm. . . ."

Fabien exclaimed that he too had been born in that same town. Very soon they decided that they had probably met in the park, might even have played together.

"I was born in Paris," Colombe told him: "but mamma went back to B . . . because my guardian was director of the theatre at that time and put her on the free list. Was it on Thursdays and Sundays that you went to the park, and what part of it, the duck-pond or the terrace?"

"Oh, we used to run all over the place."

She gave him a long look and said that she was trying to remember whether she had ever known a dark-complexioned little boy.

"But I was much older than you, probably as much as five years older!"

"And then, of course, almost all the little boys in B . . . are dark-complexioned."

There had been only one fair boy in Fabien's form at school, and he had been nicknamed the "English kid."

"If that had been you I should have remembered."

He said in reply:

"My brother was really quite fair when he was a baby, but later on his hair turned chestnut. He was going to be a priest, but he died."

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry, because it always makes me unhappy not having any brothers or sisters, and I used to think

how nice it would be if mamma would ask God whether she couldn't have some more children. But to have had a brother and then to have lost him! He must have been sweet and gentle to want to be a priest. Perhaps you teased him, because I expect you weren't always good-natured. . . . Oh, they're going to start again."

Fanny and her friend came back into the box. Fabien shut his eyes. What did it matter to him what they were playing? He imposed the rhythm of his own heart on the din made by the orchestra. Not for anything in the world would he have kept his eyes on his mistress's really lovely back. He infinitely preferred the fresh, frail reed before him, the mists of childhood just dispersing, the angular shoulders of his budding Eve.

"I can't find the sleeve," laughed Fanny as Fabien helped her, rather awkwardly, into her evening coat. Someone took it from him with an air of authority. Looking round he saw Donald Larsen.

"I think we've met before, haven't we, Monsieur Dézaymeries? At Venice, if I'm not wrong?"

They exchanged a few more words and shook hands. The giant himself wrapped the young girl up very carefully, and with a strange show of haste propelled her towards the exit. Fanny whispered to Fabien:

"To-morrow, at our house. . . . Didn't you notice how polite he was to you?"

He made no reply. His whole mind was concentrated for the moment on how to get himself into a position where the girl would see him. She had already moved some distance away, but turned her head to look for him. At last she picked him out and smiled a good-night.

He felt wildly happy striding through the darkness—though what had caused his happiness he did not know. There was nothing to warn him that it was as though an angel had passed through his life, an angel who would not return. It did not

occur to him that his mood was due to his meeting this young girl, because he had been conscious of it before he had even seen her, when the train, that morning, had carried him away from the burned-up land of melancholy, away from his mother. It had reached its apogee after his talk with Fanny when she had cried and talked of joy.

He followed the pavement that runs beside the Seine. The river lay swathed in mist. Just so, at this very moment, must the stream look in that remote countryside of his. A wreathing smoke was rising from the water as it must have done in the days when the present stone embankments were a wilderness of trees and rushes. It smelled of the days before history had begun.

Suddenly, with his elbows pressed to his side, and his bare head thrown back, the young man broke into a long, loping run. He did not stop until he had reached the Alexander Bridge. There he crossed to the further bank, with no more idea of where he was going than a homing-pigeon. If only there was someone he could talk to! He did not know a soul. Could it be that he had not a single friend? By this time he had started down the Boulevard Raspail. Shortly after passing the Croix-Rouge he recognized the house where Jacques Maïnz lived, a colleague of his at the École des Chartes, with whom his work had sometimes brought him in contact. Mainz was the best man of his year. He was a Jew, and on one occasion had said to Fabien: "You've the luck to be a believing Catholic, and yet you don't become a Benedictine. I can't think why not." The young man smiled at the recollection. He saw that his friend was burning the midnight oil, and, without stopping to think, called Maïnz's name to the concierge, and, though it was nearer to one o'clock than to midnight, knocked at his fellow-student's door.

A voice asked suspiciously who was there.

"It's me, Dézaymeries."

"My dear chap! at this time of night? What's the matter?"

Sobered by this welcome, Fabien looked at his host. The man might have been any age. Weak eyes peered out from behind a

pair of circular spectacles. Suddenly it struck him what a gulf separated his own burning heart from this other heart of ice. He excused his presence by saying that he wanted to copy out some notes of a lecture which he had missed.

"Yes, I know. You *are* getting a bit slack, Dézaymeries, and you could pass out so high if only you'd do a little work. Why, I used to look on you as a rival."

Jacques Mainz gazed at the tall, bare-headed young man whose open overcoat revealed his evening-dress. Fabien had followed him into his work-room.

"Here you are, but I must have that notebook back the day after to-morrow without fail. . . . Just a moment, I'll show you where the automatic switch is."

On the landing he added, in a tone in which contempt, affection and envy were strangely mixed:

"You're far too good-looking, you know, to make a scholar."

These farewell words served to rekindle the young man's flickering flame of happiness. He was walking slowly now, weighed down by a load of delicious heaviness. So people thought him handsome, did they? and little Colombe had liked looking at him this evening! He thought of her, at first confusedly, then with a visual precision that embarrassed him—of her shoulder, of the narrow expanse of arm where her long glove ended. . . . He closed his eyes and shook his head in the comical way he had had as a child when he wanted to get rid of a "wicked" thought. But why, now that he had tasted of the fruit of the tree, should he fight against this sense of gushing happiness? He remembered how once, when he was with Fanny at a circus, he had seen a sudden jet of dirty water squirted over the tan, lifting odds and ends of straw and dust, and making a muddy lake, the level of which slowly rose. He wanted to save little Colombe from his own unclean and detailed thoughts—but could not resist the temptation to dirty her with that knowingness which he had learned from another.

In his shabby room he went to bed without a light.

IX

FANNY was delighted, next day, to find that he was more ardent, more restlessly expectant, than she ever remembered to have seen him. What she did not know was that his mood of desire was linked with the feeling of disgust that always oppressed him, but had now been carried to such an unusual degree of intensity that it resulted in a hatred of which he was ashamed and fearful, because he could not understand the reason for it. When he thanked her because none of the furniture had been moved during his absence, she told him not to infer that her business was doing badly. All it meant was that she had gone into partnership with the Comte de X . . . and thought it better to house her stuff with him. In that way prospective customers would think that the bits and pieces were old family heirlooms, and would be prepared to pay a high price for their mistake. . . . She laughed so loudly that she did not see his sudden flush, his expression of loathing, the furtive look which he turned towards the door. While she was tidying her hair in front of a triple mirror she was able to study him without turning her head. All she realized was that she had torn the old wound open again. She tried to soft-pedal what she had just said, explaining that she had merely wanted him to "see things as they were." But the wound was open and bleeding. She was afraid that he might refuse to dine at her house that evening: but he agreed to do so with a gay alacrity which brought her some degree of reassurance.

Had he not been seated some distance away on her left, Fanny would have realized to what it was she owed his seeming impatience and happiness. He paid no attention to the other guests (English people whose language he did not understand). He spent his whole time staring at the young girl who sat at the far

end of the table, her head leaning slightly to one side, her bare arms looking decidedly cold. Her hair, dressed in the Chinese fashion which left her rather bulbous forehead uncovered, gave her the air of belonging to another period. She was wearing round her neck a child s necklace adorned with sacred medals, and each time she caught his eye she replied, as best she could, with a narrowing of the lids, a melancholy smile, a pout of her rather full lips—all intended to express her annoyance at being so far away, but also, though she did not know it, conveying the impression of a kiss. So long as she was there Fabien felt no need to close his eyes or to shake his head in an effort to drive away evil thoughts. He could see in the young body, lit, as it were, from within, all the signs of a sensitive conscience, of uncertainty and confused scruples—of some imperfectly understood mood of renunciation. But before their glances could meet they had to cross a danger zone. Donald Larsen, seated opposite Fanny, may have had a suspicion of their unspoken colloquy. He was eating greedily, drinking more greedily still, and talking hardly at all. His complexion passed through all the stages from pink to brick-red, and, finally, to purple. Several times Fabien was conscious that the china-blue eyes were fixed on him as they had been in Venice.

As soon as the ice had been served, Donald made a sign to the girl, and she disappeared. Fanny said with a laugh, "The sand-man's coming." Fabien remembered how she used to say that each evening at nine o'clock in Madame Dézaymeries' room, and how she had drawn him to her for a good-night kiss.

He did not see his wild pigeon again that evening, but was happy in the thought that she must be feeling sad.

He took the same way home as on the previous night, but his mood was melancholy and he walked more slowly. No longer did he leap like a chamois in the mist. It was his first evening of tender reverie. He felt absolutely safe, knowing that among all these ravaged hearts his was the only one on which his wild pigeon would choose to alight, because corruption, in his case,

had not progressed beyond the initial stage. Only twenty-two years had elapsed since his coming into the world. Who can corrupt the spring? Where his mother had made a mistake was in not realizing that the body, too, can be sanctified. A young man and a young girl blaze in the face of God like two high, clear flames. Drawn into one another, they show the brighter. He understood many things of which his mother was ignorant. He found a glory in realizing that he had no need to protect his love from his muddied thoughts of yesterday. He revelled in that knowledge, quite forgetting that, thanks to physical ecstasies still recent, the demon in him was temporarily sated.

Two nights later, seated at the same table between a couple of Englishmen, it was he who sought a pretext for silence. In the first place, he had been in an agony of apprehension because his wild pigeon had not been in the drawing-room. But she slipped into the dining-room with the guests, and, since there were no other women present, Donald made her sit on his right. She smiled at Fabien, but as though through prison bars. The whole situation should have warned him that somebody was doing his best to keep them apart. But if he had any suspicions they were directed solely at Fanny. He felt reassured when he saw that she was deeply involved with her English neighbour in one of those doubtless æsthetic discussions which she pursued so enthusiastically that at moments she seemed almost to be losing her temper. Fabien told himself that he would not look at the girl before the second course. But, though he did not see his wild pigeon, he could hear her fluttering in her invisible cage. She was worried by his feigned indifference. Unable any longer to keep the promise he had made to himself, he directed at her a long and ardent gaze, and saw the little face with its prominent forehead redden with a mixture of love and shame. At the same moment he was aware that Donald Larsen was staring at him in a quite intolerable manner. He pretended to be occupied with a piece of mural decoration, but the china-blue eyes were insistent. As in Venice, this man, without uttering a single word,

had voiced an entreaty with a look, so, this evening, he managed to convey by the same means a clear-cut prohibition, an obvious threat. Fabien, who had just drunk a glass of Johannisberger, felt annoyed because of the sense of embarrassment and fear that was oppressing him. He made up his mind to defy the man with the pink cheeks, whose manners, so he told himself, were those of a drunkard. It was a matter of general knowledge that, from five o'clock on, Donald Larsen was never fully under control, though he was skilful at disguising the fact. It was an understood thing that no one should ever talk to him at meals, but this evening, the young Englishman on Fabien's right, was making a polite effort to say something to him in French. He was explaining that he was an army officer, and that none of his comrades ever suspected him of writing poetry or of contributing to magazines. He never talked literature in the mess: to have done so would have more or less disgraced him. Only once had he been able to refer to a poem, because it happened to deal with fox-hunting. Fabien slowly raised his eyes and steeled himself briefly to endure the stare of the giant who, for the last ten minutes, had been drinking nothing. Then he sought the eyes of the girl, who was leaning forward in his direction, feeling his attraction as a sunflower might the sun.

It was only because Fanny's argument had become strident and because everyone else at the table was joining in that nobody noticed the terrible expression in Donald Larsen's face—the white, expressionless stare, the trembling upper lip, the glass shaking in his fingers. 'He can't do anything to you,' said Fabien to himself; 'it doesn't matter to you what *he* wants. What is he, anyhow, if it comes to that?' No one in Paris was more looked down upon. Besides, hadn't he trafficked in his own wife? But what the young country-bred man most strongly felt was the peasant's distrust and hatred of the man of uncertain origins, of the nomad, the mountebank. 'No one knows where this Larsen comes from: a Dane fathered by a German Jew!' Fabien outstared the loathsome gaoler with a feeling of delight. Slowly the

girl turned her head away. One hand was raised to her rather exposed throat. What would the giant do? The veins were standing out on his temples, and fury was making him sway like a beech-tree. Fabien expected an outburst. If only he too could give his anger rein! He would not mince words! If necessary, he would go for this Goliath physically. But suddenly Goliath grew calm. He leaned towards Colombe and his purple lips began to move close to her flushed little ear. At his first words she stared stupidly at Fabien, then, seemingly, voiced a protest. But the man interrupted her, and she listened in silence. "Look at the old man making up to his daughter!" Colombe directed a quick, terrified glance at Fabien while the purple lips went on muttering. With the whole table between them, what could Fabien do to counter the deadly things the swine was saying? She asked Larsen a question, to which he replied with a melancholy seriousness. Fabien saw her suddenly flush scarlet. He knew that the blow had come!—could feel it strike home in his own flesh. He had no idea what, precisely, had been the blow the man had aimed, but he felt as though he had received a mortal wound. His neighbour asked him whether he was feeling unwell. Fabien gave him a terrified stare, but said nothing. He saw Donald Larsen pass his napkin over his face, which had suddenly become convulsed by a fit of coughing which set his scarlet jowl quivering. Of what nature was the secret with which he had overpowered the innocent girl? Her narrow, childish face had hardened. She was crushing a rosebud in her hand, and picking off its petals one by one. Fabien wanted to cry aloud: "Whatever he has been saying about me, don't believe it!"—but he had to sit there motionless, correct, a silent witness of his own death. If only he could have caught her eye!—but she seemed no longer to be aware of his presence. He had ceased to exist for her; he had just been murdered. At last Fanny got up. Another minute and Fabien would no longer have been able to contain himself. In the drawing-room the girl handed round the coffee. He waited for the moment when she would approach

him. But, having served all the other guests, she gave him a look of contempt which left him in no doubt of her deliberate avoidance, and passed on. He followed her into the passage, heard a door shut and the sound of a key turning in the lock.

He made for his usual refuge, a small empty drawing-room, now completely deserted. It was filled with lacquer furniture, and a single lamp gave light to its equivocal intimacy. Stretched on a divan, he began to smoke Turkish cigarettes, lighting them one after the other, endlessly. On a low table, within reach of his hand, glittered a decanter of sweet wine. Several times he filled and emptied a long-stemmed glass, striving to attain to a state of besotted insensibility, sleep, a death that should be eternal. If only he could get rid of the obsessive thought that Donald Larsen had not even had to lie about him! 'In order to pass sentence of death upon me in the girl's eyes, he had only to explain the meaning of my presence in this house. . . . I expect he implied that I was a kept man. I'm twenty-two, and Fanny is almost an old woman. . . . Would it do any good to write to her? I bet he keeps a careful eye on the letters she gets. . . . What bliss it would be never to see Fanny again . . . and if she dies of it, well, let her. . . . No, no, I mustn't say that. Besides, if I were separated from Fanny it would mean that I should be separated from the girl as well. . . . Nothing to do but drink. . . .' He longed to sleep, and when, finally, sleep overcame him, lay with his head thrown back against the cushions. His arm slipped limply from the divan. His hand lay like a dead thing on the carpet.

He had a confused feeling that someone else was in the room, but did not immediately open his eyes. He could hear the sound of breathing. A young man was standing by him. Where had he seen him already? The frail torso above the over-developed thighs looked as though it had been poured into the short jacket. The clean-shaven face showed blue round the thick lips. Fabien recognized the voice as Cyrus Bargues's.

"Did I wake you up?—how *beastly* of me! There's something so *mysterious*, don't you think, when people are asleep—*young* people, I mean, of course. To see an *old* man asleep is like watching a dress-rehearsal of the stroke that's going to carry him off! *Actually*, my dear, I don't expect you to thank me. . . . All the same . . . in Venice. . . ."

He broke off because Fabien, his hair tousled, his fists clenched and a glowering expression on his face, looked as though he might be about to attack him. But the mingled fumes of sweet wine and Turkish cigarettes made him fall back again on the cushions. He was already half drunk, and there was no longer room in his mind for anything so clear-cut as hatred, disgust or distress. As though he were imparting some profound secret, he said:

"There are, you know, such things as legitimate caresses."

Cyrus broke into a guffaw of strident laughter. He declared that he knew of no caresses that were not legitimate. Fabien replied in tones of the deepest gravity:

"There are such things: of that there can be no doubt—no doubt at all. But we men are so naturally responsive to caresses that they give us a wonderful illusion of infinity—and therein lies danger."

"Therein lies their charm, is what you mean, my dear. You really are the most *delicious* of creatures, quite *entrancing* . . . but to be avoided when you're sober. What you need is another drink. We'd better go by the passage and down the back stairs, so as to avoid our hosts."

At a bar in the rue Duphot they started in on whisky. Fabien achieved a mood of exaltation which brought him relief and peace of mind. Everything was turning out exactly as he wanted it to. He would discard Fanny like a bundle of old rags. Either she would kill herself or she wouldn't. The choice was hers! The only thing he cared about was to get back to his wild pigeon. It needed only a word from him and she would understand and

forgive. They would go away somewhere and live far from the haunts of men with the pine-trees of his childhood for company. . . . Who was this young man whispering in his ear and pressing him to drink? Seemed a good sort—was saying the dance must be purged of all ornament, made hieratic and expressive of ecstasy. But why should Cyrus want to leave this warm, cosy bar where women sat perched on stools looking like ibises? (he had never seen an ibis). . . . In the cloak-room they all used the same lipstick. . . . Cyrus led him outside. The street was as moist and as warm as a mouth. In the next bar, in spite of the frantic din made by the band, Fabien no longer felt happy. He took a cocktail and it made him sad. With the second his feeling of joy became slowly immersed in a dark flood. He kept on repeating like an imbecile, "Colombe—Saint-Colombe—little Sainte-Colombe." Cyrus said that, personally, he found her too old for a little girl and too young for a woman.

"You have turned up either too soon or too late. Besides, make no mistake about it, the old man's got ambitions for that child of his. He has suddenly noticed that there beats within his breast a father's heart. He is aiming to find a husband for her from the very tip-top drawer—some superannuated peer or glittering maharajah—they *are* to be found, you know, if only one looks in the right places. . . . Hullo, now you're crying! You look so *funny*, my dear, just like a small boy!"

No woman, he went on, had ever made *him* cry. He loved nothing but his art. Women always needed so much reassuring. One had got to be for ever stroking and petting them like animals.

By this time Fabien was quite incapable of controlling his movements. In an effort to blow his nose he upset both their glasses, after which he sank into a doze. When he emerged from it, Cyrus was saying that he had tried cocaine once, when he had been going through hell because of somebody whose name he wouldn't mention.

"But it doesn't soothe one as much as they say it does. The

only effect it had on me was to make me *terribly* irritable. A curtain in my room had only to be crooked. . . . It was dancing that saved me."

Somewhat later he said:

"Don't cry, you little silly. The only thing in life that matters is to be twenty-two. . . . A time will come when one will no longer be an object of desire to anyone. There is only one form of perfect happiness—to know that one is surrounded by a thousand fierce desires, to hear about one the crackling of branches. . . ."

Fanny was tolerant of Fabien's escapade; was even pleased to think that he had gone on the loose. She had her own ingenious methods of getting rid of the effects of his night out. Long experience had taught her how to deal with the morning after. But she did say: "What on earth have you done to Donald to make him so mad at you? The moment I try to put in a good word for you he jumps down my throat. You've no idea what coarse language he uses in front of the child, too. It won't be long before the bloom's rubbed off *her*! Why are you making such a face? Are you in pain, my pet?"

She thoroughly enjoyed arranging his pillows, laying cool hands on his forehead, behaving like a young mother comforting her big son. With his haggard cheeks and mournful expression he looked so like the little Fabien whom once she had taken on her knees! She even ventured to mention Thérèse Dézaymeries, and grew slightly sentimental. The only gentleness she had known in her life, she said, was associated in her mind with evenings spent in Thérèse's room. Did Fabien remember the grey wallpaper and the enlarged Nadar photograph of his father? The lamp had had a shade of pink ribbed glass, and they had loved running their fingers up and down the grooves when they were small boys.

"You used to sit on a stool at our feet, and, when you looked at me, your eyes were full of innocence, uncertainty and dreams.

You played silent games in the dark corner between your little white bed and your mother's *prie-Dieu*."

Fanny was remembering the whisper of the rain, the crackling of the fire and the boy's low muttering. She had come to that room from very far away, dropping to rest in the quiet lamp-light like a tired bird. She had made one with those innocent hearts and simple things. One evening, Fabian, his face pressed to the cross-bars of the window, had been playing a game which consisted in trying to follow the movements of one single swallow among all the bewildering dartings of its fellows. She had thought that he looked like the imprisoned Dauphin. She could never, afterwards, hear the cries of swifts on country roofs without seeing again, in imagination, the stuffy room, and Thérèse, all anxiety lest she miss the devotions of the Month of Mary in the Cathedral. . . .

She stopped talking, realizing that he was asleep. Never before had she been so deeply impressed by the look of chastity on his virile face, by that nobility which marks the faces of young men whom it is a woman's mission to corrupt, but which no soiling can destroy: the last trace of childhood, hovering like a patch of mist impervious to the midday sun. She touched the smooth forehead with her lips as she had seen his mother do, straightened his blankets, and was still at her post when night fell, lost in dreams beside the sleeping youth.

X

FANNY had asked the young man not to come again to the Quai Debilly until after Donald Larsen had left on his next trip to London.

"I just don't know what's biting him. Are you sure you've said nothing to annoy him? And the child's playing up to him!

He's putting her against me, against both of us. What on earth can he be up to? I just pretend not to understand all his vulgar hints and innuendos. . . . Darling, *don't* look so tragic! Donald Larsen's scarcely in a position to spread scandal about anyone. I wouldn't say it except to you, but mark my words, it's a good deal more dangerous to have him as a friend than as an enemy. . . . The only thing that matters is that he shan't separate *us*. After all, he's utterly dependent on me, and he knows perfectly well that my whole life is wrapped up in you."

With her head on Fabien's shoulders she begged him in vain to show her a little affection. It was a dark afternoon in the gloomy depth of winter. Fortunately, the low lamp shone only on the young man's hands and knees. His face, with its expression of hatred and repulsion, was invisible. . . . Until Donald Larsen's next trip to London . . . could he hold out so long? He brought himself, nowadays, to endure Fanny's presence only because he knew that if he gave her up he would lose all hope of winning his wild pigeon. But now that he could not see the girl, he found it agony to play the lover with a woman whom he detested. But his performance, alas! was too bad to deceive his former mistress, though she still believed that it was because of his religious scruples that he had turned from her. She never dreamed of looking for any other reason to explain his bitterness and lack of ardour. But it was not God who stood between her and Fabien. The wretched youth had certainly not ceased to believe in what once had been the whole of life for him, but he *had* accepted the fact that he was now dead to that life. He had consented to leave the ship, had landed on a coast of dust and ashes. There was no hope that the vessel would ever return to rescue his wrecked soul. He was prepared to envisage what once would have filled him with horror. If it was Fanny's destiny to kill herself, then kill herself she must. He could no longer bring himself to put his arms protectingly about that worn and used-up body. Often, in the course of the sunless winter, sitting on the iron bedstead in his hotel room with its low ceiling and its

mingled smell of soap and tobacco, when he ought to have been at his classes, or working in one of the libraries, he surrendered himself to the desire of a sleep from which there should be no awakening. The idea fascinated him. But he had no belief in the possibility of such a sleep, and he was afraid of God.

Since the night he had spent with the dancer making the round of the bars, though he had not again got drunk, he had taken to drinking rather more at his meals than good sense allowed, and just enough to produce a temporary feeling of exaltation. At such moments he imagined himself sitting outside a café looking on to an unfamiliar landscape, with Colombe at his side gazing at him. He felt like a man armed and vigorous, vigorous enough to fight his way to her through all difficulties, to calm her fears, to overcome her resistance. . . . But later, back once more in his low-ceilinged room, poisoning himself with tobacco, he would wander from bed to window, from window to bed, a prey to uncertainty. 'If I did carry you off, my poor little pigeon, what should I do with you? Would my mother welcome a girl born out of wedlock, and with such a father? And could *I* ever feel love for a son of mine who had in his veins the blood of a Larsen? My own children would be objects of horror to me.'

It was on these lines that his thoughts were running when Fanny took his face in her two hands, bent above his eyes with their absent look, and said:

"What are you thinking about?"

He replied ill-temperedly: "Not about you."

He broke from her. Wearily, Fanny tied her veil, not even bothering to look at herself in the glass. She was now in a mood of violent self-pity:

"You won't have much longer to wait: you'll be rid of me a good deal sooner than you think. But won't you just give me *one* look? You haven't looked at me since I came in. When I'm in your arms I seek in vain to read your baffled eyes. It is as though something in you were running away from me,

were trying to put an infinite distance between us. But take care! . . ."

"Isn't what I leave behind enough to satisfy you?"

"Your body, you mean? . . . The body is everything and nothing. It is of value only because of *that*—I don't know what—that something which you take from it before you hand it over. . . . *You're* the one who gives yourself like a . . ."

The word was crude. He opened the door and, without looking at her, said:

"Get out! Get out!"

She stopped for a moment on the threshold. "It will have been your doing, Fabien." A moment later she was in the street. For all his earlier mood, the threat had its effect upon him. He hurried after her and caught her up at the corner of the rue Bonaparte. She was walking fast, like a woman pursued. Some of the people she passed turned to look at her. When she reached the river she had to slow down. They were side by side now, moving through the mist. A young street-urchin followed them with his eyes: perhaps they had roused a sense of envy in him. Fabien said that he was suffering, and that when he was suffering he was an impossible companion. She thought that he was alluding to what she called his mystical day-dreaming. Would he never rid himself of all that nonsense? How dared *he* talk of suffering—a young man of twenty-two who had someone to love him? Had he any idea what she, after this unspeakable afternoon, was going to find when she got home? A girl to whom she was devoted, but who was now turned against her, a girl whose air of contempt was utterly exasperating: a man who put up with her merely because he found her necessary. No good mincing words: at bottom Donald detested her, but he knew that on her depended the bulk of his fortune. If she hadn't a positive genius for picking up old furniture, if she hadn't learned all about the picture racket, what would become of Larsen with all his grandiose but ruinous schemes?

She was at the end of her tether and stopped dead. They hailed a taxi. She continued with the tale of her woes.

"Never any let-up for me! This evening I've got to go to the Cirque Médrano with the pair of them, because Donald, who's got some supper engagement or other, insists on my being there to take the child home. Can't you imagine what fun that drive back will be for me in the company of a self-righteous and hostile little miss!"

Fabien asked her why she didn't leave Larsen. She replied that she no longer felt strong enough or brave enough to live alone.

"And who would have me now, Fabien?"

He turned away without replying. Having dropped her at her door, he went home on foot. He, too, would go to the circus that evening. The thought helped him to bear the burden of existence. He must learn how to get what enjoyment he could out of small, brief pleasures. Walking in Paris was, he had found, the best way of escaping from his troubles. Sometimes he would wake from his fits of dreaming in the middle of the road with traffic swirling round him. To-night he reached his room without having the slightest idea of the route he had taken. He was surprised to see a light shining from under his door. Jacques Maïnz, his fellow-student at the École des Chartes, had been waiting for three-quarters of an hour. This was the first time he had ever paid Fabien a visit. He apologized for intruding on his privacy in this way, but the matter about which he had come was urgent. The Director was thinking of taking disciplinary measures against Dézaymeries on the ground that he absented himself from half his lectures.

"Don't you know any doctor who would give you a bogus certificate? That'd do the trick. There's a friend of mine: I'd gladly give you an introduction."

Fabian looked at the mass of untidy hair, at the pimply face, at the eyes which would have been fine if they had not grown dim from poring over manuscripts. The whole man was a product of laborious days spent in a library. He said:

"Don't worry your head about me. I'm sending in my resignation to-morrow."

Until this moment such an idea had never even entered his head, but he knew now, beyond all possibility of doubt, that his decision was irrevocable. It had been maturing in his mind without his being aware of it.

"D'you mean to say that you're leaving, Dézaymeries?"

"Why should you care?"

Maïnz, without moving from his chair, raised his lashless eyes and looked at Fabien.

"I shall miss you. True, we've never been friends, and I never really believed we could be. All the same, I liked to see you enjoying life. You brought—how shall I put it?—romance and colour into the place. . . . Don't shrug your shoulders and look sullen. As a matter of fact, I think you're perfectly right to clear out. You never really belonged to us. I had a pretty good idea of the way your mind was working. . . . I suppose it surprises you to hear a 'dirty Jew' talking like this?"

"I've never confided in you."

"Yes you have, often, though you didn't know it. For instance, one day when we were talking about Saint Catherine of Siena you trotted out a whole theory of the nature of love. You described the frantic appetite that can never be strangled, the appetite that only we ourselves can divert God-wards. You told me that no human being can remain stationary, that the Infinite is a river and that we've got to go either upstream or down—up to God our source, or down to the desperation of a nameless bitterness. There is, you said, such a thing as a sort of reversed perfection, the possibility of becoming always more and more criminal. . . . You see, you can't get away from your Catholic heritage. And all the time you were talking—we were leaning together over the same facsimile—I was conscious of a sort of fragrance. You're not the kind of chap who uses scent. . . . Now don't get mad. You see, I admire and envy you. Had I been of your faith, I should have been precisely the same sort of person

I am now, doing exactly the same work, the only difference being that I should be wearing a monk's habit and living in some abbey or other. But in a chap like you the Catholic religion produces a whole crop of conflicts and private dramas. . . ."

The man was wholly devoid of tact. There was a heavy quality about his laughter. But Fabien, as a rule so quick to take offence, hung his head. It was with an air of humility that he replied:

"There's something I want to beg of you, Maînz, and that is that you won't judge the tree by its rotten fruit—which is what I am . . . promise me."

"It seems to me very curious and interesting, Dézaymeries, that you should say a thing like that, that you should be obsessed by a scruple of that kind. The rest of us will just turn into archivists. Like everyone else in the world, we have found our particular mill, and we shall spend our lives turning it (in my case, it might just as well have been a lawyer's practice, an office or a factory). Rimbaud was perfectly right when he said '*La main à plume vaut la main à charrue. Quel siècle à mains.*' Fundamentally, all a man cares about is stupefying himself. Intensity of life can be found equally well in business or drink. Work, too, is a narcotic, and action, after all, is a form of sleep. Well, you have chosen life. Who was it said that the inner life is the only reality? My dear fellow, there are only two types of person that I admire: those, like you, who, instead of dissipating their energies in action, are self-creators, achieving self-mastery and enduring self-loss only to find themselves again triumphantly in an emotional struggle for a stake which is God—and those wise men of the East who also find their way to the divine, but by a different and perhaps a surer route; those for whom sanctity is detachment, who say of themselves that they have been 'delivered from the prison of life.' . . . Forgive me if I say that I think they have chosen the better part. I have a feeling that Buddha was, on the whole, the supreme example of human greatness. . . ."

"That's because you have no knowledge of Christ."

Maïnz, who was striding up and down the room, which was so small that the smoke from their two cigarettes shrouded the whole of its contents in mist, stopped in front of the tall, bitter young man whose tormented expression he guessed rather than saw.

"I know something of him, Dézaymeries, because I know you. . . ."

Fabien shook his head:

"He is in me no longer," he said, and repeated the words—"He is in me no longer."

"My poor young Christian, how wrong you are. Why, he possesses you entirely, rends you in twain, tears you from every foot-hold, detaches you from life at every moment of every day. . . ."

"I say again—don't judge the tree by its rotten fruit. There *are* Christians who can be joyful."

"I know that, my friend. I have made notes on the joys of Christians according to Pascal (you remember his letter to Mademoiselle de Roannez?). I have read the wildly joyful Odes of your poet Claudel."

In a low voice, Fabien said: "I am in torment!"

It was the first time in his life that he had ever confided in a friend, and the experience brought him a secret sweetness. This evening he had met the Jew who was called Simon of Cyrene.

He forgot all about dinner and turned up punctually at the circus. The place smelled of tan and clean stables. He remembered the Thursday long ago when he had gone with Joseph to the circus at Bordeaux. It was the one and only time that their mother had consented to take them. What mingled feelings of wonder and terror he had known on that occasion! . . . They had left before the end because there was to be a ballet. The fag-end of daylight had been hanging about the Place des Quinconces. The fair was emptying. The damp evening breeze was

rapidly dissipating the smell of hot coffee and waffles. He had a headache as the result of laughing so much. He felt detached from all the trivial daily round. His mother said they must hurry. There would be only just time to get their home-work finished before dinner.

With a trembling hand he snatched up his opera-glasses. The "wild pigeon" was sitting in the front of a box. Fanny looked gross and heavy. She was wearing a frock cut too low in the neck for such an occasion. Larsen's shirt-front glinted. Suddenly Fabien noticed that his wild-pigeon had changed. She had lit a cigarette, and looked comic because she smoked it as though she were sucking a stick of barley-sugar. She laughed with a great deal of grimacing, and turned to Larsen. She was probably saying that she felt "positively *drunk*" and that she was "laughing herself *sick*." What innocence could stand out for long against the poisonous atmosphere diffused by Fanny? Evil is as infectious as any disease.

Somewhat later he saw her reddening her lips. She was laughing loudly, and a young man in a neighbouring box leaned forward to look at her. Fabien told himself that if he could bring himself to renew his visits to the Quai Debilly there might still be time to save her from sinking altogether into the mire.

There was no need for him to pull his hat down over his eyes. These thousands of laughing faces were concentrated on the antics of the Fratellini Brothers. Colombe would never notice him in this dark, surging crowd which rippled with mirth like water under a stiff breeze. There was still time to rescue her. Might he not, by doing so, find his own way back to a state of grace? What else was there for him to do with his life? Fanny, in any case, was lost utterly. No man can save a corpse. He would sacrifice her in the cause of his wild pigeon. . . . Larsen, by failing to acknowledge his paternity, had no legal hold over her. Madame Dézaymeries would give her consent provided he could persuade her that his marriage was a duty, an obligation and not

a pleasure. They would live the whole year round in the country —*his* country. . . .

There was a sudden blare of music, and the laughter of the audience was drowned by the din of the brass. A number of trick-riders were dashing round the ring lightly poised on the shining cruppers of their horses. . . .

What sort of life would they lead in that remote countryside? He trembled with anticipated pleasure, thinking of the nights they would spend together in the sparsely furnished room smelling of pitch-pine. In imagination he could hear the cocks crowing from farm to farm, and the hooting of owls, sounds that would make a background to young love with nothing in it of sin. Unconsciously, his mind took the direction of what Maînz had said. The thought of an existence that should be all a conquest of the spirit, a process of interior mastery, enchanted him. Deep in the happiness of his home he would again find God. . . . The passages would echo to the noise of children's feet. . . . The lamp would shine upon their faces as they sat nodding sleepily over books. He would saunter with his pigeon through the dark garden. She would say: "I can't see the path." . . . Light would show red in the windows, or perhaps cut hearts of fire in the shutters.

He felt hungry and decided to leave during the interval. It is easier to think when one is walking. How many plans for a life in the country are brought to a head in the streets of Paris! . . . One last look at Colombe in her box and he was off, striding through the night, a tireless child of the heathlands, striving, without success, to deaden with physical fatigue the clamours of his lusty blood. Solitude! solitude! He would have liked to take up his conversation with Maînz where it had been left. And then, suddenly, he began to think again of Fanny. Could one go on living if there was always with one the memory of a woman whom one had driven to her death? But perhaps she would *not* kill herself. 'The main thing is not to go on committing adultery. That's where my strict duty lies.' Any priest would tell him that.

Besides, there was always the fact of grace, the reality of prayer, to be taken into account. Fanny would *not* be abandoned. He bit his lower lip and murmured to himself: "Hypocrite! filthy hypocrite!" . . . He had something cold to eat at Weber's, and drank champagne. Alone at his table he felt cut off from the rest of mankind. All of a sudden he was swept by a gust of happiness. Would he have liked to have Colombe there beside him at that moment? No. . . . Suppose she had gone from him for ever, suppose she were dead, suppose he were handed a letter which she had written and addressed to him before she died? He composed its contents in imagination, and the tears welled into his eyes so that he had to hide his face. Oh, yes, he loved her, of that there could be no doubt at all; he loved her. But, in that future time, when they should be married and living remotely in the country, the thought of love would not be always, as it was with Fanny, in the forefront of their minds, a sickening obsession, an idiotic futility. Life, real life, has something better to bother about. The first thing for him to do was to get some order into the chaos of his thoughts. Now that the appalling hurricane had roared through him and passed on, he must settle down and write, live for the service of truth, be at once famous and alone, inaccessible to the crowd, yet known to all the world.

XI

NEXT day Fabien was prodigal of so much unaccustomed tenderness that Fanny's suspicions were at once awakened. In his clumsy fashion he thought it a master-stroke to tell her that he had gone to the circus on the previous evening for the sole pleasure of looking at his mistress from a distance. He entirely ignored all those proofs of wariness which he had far too often given Fanny in the past, and was ready to convince

himself that a woman in love can have the wool pulled over her eyes in the crudest fashion. But his kindness worried his mistress far more than the rebuffs to which she had grown used. His clumsiness at times verged on the ridiculous. Much of his charm was due to his attitude of complete indifference where love was concerned. The apathy with which he could take without even pretending to give in return could be actually attractive. It was apt to be shot through with an occasional access of violent passion which made up for all that had gone before, making it possible for her to endure the rapidly ensuing mood of bitterness, and the sight of his face suddenly withdrawn behind a curtain of self-disgust.

How false his voice sounded when he allowed himself to go so far as to say that he was "*longing*" for the Quai Debilly! The stupid creature really believed that it was impossible for love to be clear-sighted. He forgot (if he had ever known) that though the one who is loved may know nothing of the other who loves, the reverse is never true. Fanny knew the youth on whom her whole happiness, her very life, depended, far better than she knew herself. She was too weather-wise a sailor, had too often studied, when they met, her lover's every gesture and every look, not immediately to smell out deception when it came her way. In his case absence of love meant absence of knowledge. Indifference is blind. Why should he want to start coming again to the Quai Debilly? The thought of Colombe as a possible explanation had not yet entered her mind, either because it did not occur to her that so young a girl could please a man in that way (not to mention the fact that she found her gawky and plain), or because the idea of Fabien really in love would have been intolerable to her. She must, however, have been getting "warm" when she said to him:

"You can come to the house quite safely on Saturday. Donald won't be back until late. He's dining at Versailles with the Princess Z . . . and the next day he's off again."

Instinctively she avoided saying anything more about this

projected trip of her husband, which in point of fact closely concerned Colombe. A more attentive lover would have noticed how she was lighting cigarette after cigarette and throwing each away almost unsmoked: the way in which she kept on flicking the ash off with her finger. As a rule she took "a perfect age"—as Fabien said—"to get out of the room," but to-night she seemed all eagerness to be alone. Far from letting this worry him, he found in it a reason for rejoicing. He could not go on much longer aping a tenderness he did not feel, and found himself caddishly blaming her—poor thing!—for the necessity he was under to play a part.

He let her leave first. Only when she had got a good start of him did he emerge from the house in the rue Visconti. Instead of going straight back to his hotel, he crossed the Seine at a brisk pace and walked for a while along the railings of the Tuileries gardens. The gates at this hour had been already closed, so that he was shut out from communion with the trees which lent a note of beauty to the misty emptiness within. That very morning he had sent in his resignation to the Director of the École des Chartes. In two days' time he would be seeing Colombe again. Thus he had taken the first step to freedom and happiness. To gauge the extent of his love he no longer had to imagine that Colombe was dead, nor yet to conjure up the image of that last letter she might have written to him. After every tryst in the rue Visconti his passion for the girl increased, drawing strength from the feelings of disgust which Fanny woke in him. In what way did the young fool imagine that marriage would differ from what he had known already? What sort of a dream was it that he entertained of a sensuality made one with chastity? It was not yet quite dark, and he felt a little shock of surprise to find that the sky above the Place de la Concorde could be so beautiful, brushed in, as it were, for the express purpose of serving as a background to it. He felt no need of companionship. If, at that moment, he had run across Maînz, he would have avoided him. The fullness of his heart sufficed. In the rue de la Paix he was

conscious of the silent invitation lurking in the faces of shop-girls disgorged from the various buildings. His wild pigeon, he thought, would put up scarcely any resistance. He had only to beckon and she would come.

At last the day dawned when he was to see the girl. He started the afternoon by having his hair cut, after which he returned to his hotel and ran up the stairs, whistling. Fanny was waiting for him in his room. She was sitting on the bed. Her furs gave her a thick and padded appearance, and she was wearing a veil. He tried in vain to keep his temper. He had not been expecting her, and this sort of thing was not playing the game. There was nothing he so much disliked as meeting her at times other than those of their prearranged trysts in the rue Visconti. . . . There would be trouble with the manager.

"And I'd planned it as such a pleasant surprise for you! You were so sweet to me last time!"

He heard the ache in her words, but not the irony. It was just like women all over, he grumbled: the more one gives, the more they want. He walked up and down the tiny room, the ceiling of which he could have touched by stretching his hand. He began gesticulating in a sudden burst of southern exuberance. She, meanwhile, remained motionless on the bed, watching him. Her passivity got on his nerves. He told her that she must go.

"Come on, get out!"

What he meant was, "Leave this room," but she made a pretence of believing that he intended this to be a final break, and began to whine.

"But where am I to go, Fabien?"

She was at the end of her tether, within measurable distance of complete collapse.

"You no longer believe a word I say. No one ever does believe people who say they wish they were dead."

"We're dead already," he replied.

She tried to turn the whole thing into a joke.

"I must say, my dear, you've got a very odd idea of love! Those who tried to make love a crime were rightly regarded as the enemies of the human race. . . . If only I could convince you that the only way of loving is to avoid all these complicated feelings, these dramas, these metaphysical subtleties. . . ."

"Oh, do for once look at things straight! If you hadn't met me that day in Venice, you would have been dead by this time!"

He had lost all control of himself. He told her, not once but again and again, that, but for him, love would have killed her. None but fools and hypocrites maintained that it was only religion that had given love its power to destroy, that, but for religion, passion would be nothing but unalloyed delight. As though the flesh was not perfectly capable, unaided, of distilling poison! Though, as a rule, he hated any suspicion of rhetoric, he added:

"Go out into the streets, into the promenades of music-halls, into the brothels, and see what this beautiful 'love' you're always talking about can make of human beings!"

She protested that what he was referring to wasn't love at all. He agreed, but only to argue that what she called love produced precisely the same fruit. It didn't need God to interfere. Concupiscence alone could set the world in a blaze. He made no attempt to moderate his language, but went on to describe with gloating delight the hideous old age of women who have lived only for the pleasures of the body—Circes made desperate by the realization that they can no longer turn men into swine. It was no arbitrary pronouncement of the Church that had conferred this frightful pre-eminence on the sin of sexual vice and sensual self-indulgence. Once let human beings set their feet upon that slippery slope and there was no stopping their headlong descent.

And so he talked on, pressing his face to the window, not seeing the prostrate figure on the bed, though he could hear her panting breath. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by a sense of

shame because he had brought God into this discussion. It was from habit only that he was trotting out these noble sentiments. If he had not wanted Colombe he could have put up with Fanny. It was a young girl—and not the Infinite Majesty—who was estranging him from his former mistress.

Like many women who are quite incapable of putting two and two together, or of arguing rationally, she kept on repeating, either because she had not heard, or had entirely failed to grasp, what Fabien was saying:

"If it wasn't for these morbid scruples of yours, darling, you *would* love me, and there would be joy for you in that love."

"You poor, demented creature, *can't* you see that if I don't wash my hands of you, it's for one reason and one reason only —because I feel that I am responsible for your immortal soul. I wonder whether you've got the slightest idea what it means to be responsible for another person's immortal soul? What binds us together is the sin that we have jointly committed. I can't acquiesce in your eternal damnation. We must sink or swim together. . . . But I don't suppose that a single word of what I'm saying makes sense to you."

Once again he relapsed into silence. He was filled with a sense of self-loathing because if, once upon a time, he really had felt some such scruple, really had believed that he had no right to concentrate upon his own salvation to the exclusion of hers, it was equally true to-day that he didn't give a hang for Fanny or for the destiny of her immortal soul. Of what had formerly been in him an excessive sensitivity of conscience he retained, now, nothing but the vocabulary. That his sin had been joyless did not alter the fact that, because of it, he had become diminished in moral stature, impoverished and hard.

Fanny got up, went over to him, put her arms round his neck, and moaned in heartbroken accents:

"Oh, *don't* tell me that's the only reason that you have remained faithful to me!"

Because she had been a constant first-nighter, a phrase of

modish theatrical jargon came easily to her lips (on anybody else's it would have sounded comic):

"Ah, Fabien, do not be false to our love!"

He gave a mirthless laugh and shrugged his shoulders. She switched on the light, and they gazed at one another with eyes that were eloquent of nothing but violence and death: she, desolate with weeping, old and defeated; he, no whit diminished in his vigour by their acrid argument. His youth seemed actually to have gained something of radiance from the devastation of the storm that had been raging between them, like a tree whose leaves look all the greener and more brilliant for the rain. . . . Fanny was tidying her hair before the mirror, fastening her veil. She must be going because they had a dinner-party that evening. In Fabien's mind there was nothing at this moment but the thought of Colombe, and he said with the gayest of gay intonations:

"I'll be round as soon as I've changed."

She turned towards him, utterly dumbfounded. How could he *dream* of dining at the Quai Debilly after such a scene? She noticed his expression of mingled embarrassment and expectation. With assumed indifference she said:

"You'd much better wait a few hours. Donald's going away to-morrow for a month. He *says* it's because he's got to take Colombe back to her mother, but actually he's going to meet Leda Southers. . . ."

"Is Colombe leaving, then?"

Fabien could not help raising his voice. Fanny appeared to interpret his cry as indicative of joy.

"Yes, you spoiled child: father and daughter are going to leave the coast clear. You'll be able, once more, to treat the Quai Debilly as your home."

He went with her to the door.

"Perhaps," he said uncertainly, "I'll look in for a moment round about ten, just to ask your forgiveness for my ill-temper."

Fanny went down the dark staircase, her face turned towards her lover, who was standing looking over the banisters. In the car she forced herself to gaze straight and firmly at this new uprush of pain, this sudddn onset of agonizing jealousy. She was like a newly awakened sleeper who, when the shutters are thrown open, has to accustom his eyes to the blinding sunlight.

XII

FABIEN must have realized his danger, because, having dressed with the intention of dining at the Quai Debilly, in spite of Fanny's protest, he dared not take the risk, but wandered about in the mist that hung about between the parapet and the trees of the deserted river bank. He would not go up until he had seen the lights flash on behind the curtains of the drawing-room windows. He had an instinctive awareness of the peril he was running, but could think of nothing but Colombe and her impending departure. Once she had gone he would fall again into the old rut, would find himself face to face with Fanny for ever and ever. From then on his life would be completely empty. But there was still this one evening left, and he had made up his mind to take the chance it offered.

They must have finished dinner by this time. He entered the house, but was terrified by the reflection of his haggard face in the hall mirror, and stopped for a moment to straighten his tie. Fanny was not in the large drawing-room, and his entrance passed unnoticed. Colombe was not there either. He hunted for her in vain through all the other rooms, but found no trace of her until he reached the small room furnished with lacquer, where he had got drunk one evening on sweet wine. He came to a dead stop outside the door, his heart beating, because he had recognized the voices of Cyrus Bargues and Colombe.

"*Actually*, in a month's time all the women will have had their hair cut; you see if I'm not right. Do let me cut yours, *dear* Colombe. A ballet-master can turn his hand to anything. I should hate you to go before I had seen you looking like a young and sexless god with a head of cropped curls. . . . It'll be so *screamingly* funny to play a trick on the others. The melancholy stallion will look more melancholy than ever."

Fabien trembled because he heard Colombe say: "Oh, *he* doesn't bother about *me*. We all know why *he's* here, don't we?"

"For you, darling. Why, he just *gobbles* you up with his eyes . . . besides, he has talked to me about you. . . ."

"That's not true, and you only say it because you want to make me angry. You don't believe, do you, that I care what a horrible creature like that thinks? No, please don't tell me what he said. I'm sure it was something beastly."

Fabien could imagine the childish mouth all puckered up to spit out that final word "beastly." But Cyrus was protesting:

"No, really you're wrong. *Actually* he's terribly good-looking."

"I'm not talking about his appearance."

"That's the only thing about him that matters, Colombe, dear. . . ."

"What *did* he say about me? Something awful, I'm sure. Do tell me, Cyrus."

"If you want me to answer your question, go and fetch the scissors. It really will be great fun. You see if it isn't. You will feel them cold against your neck. I can hear the sound of them cutting through that dense young forest of yours . . . cro . . . cro . . . cro. We'll let the melancholy stallion sweep up the fallen locks."

"How silly you are, Cyrus: you're quite the silliest boy I've ever met. You don't honestly think, do you, that I mind what the melancholy stallion said about me? And, by the way, why do you call him a stallion? Isn't a stallion a thoroughbred horse? I don't think *he's* got much breeding . . . he's more like a country

lout. . . . Look how thick my hair is. and I've got nothing but embroidery scissors."

"I've seen scissors of all sizes in Fanny's dressing-room. Come along, Colombe. Nobody will disturb us there, and we can achieve the transformation at our leisure. I can work miracles. A dancer is possessed of the divine fire. At this moment you're nothing but a little girl—but you're going to be turned into a young Bacchus. You'll enchant not only the melancholy stallion but all those who find delight in ambiguities and uncertainties and the mingling of the sexes."

"There's something awfully odd about you, Cyrus. Do you know what I think when I look into your little burning eyes—that you're possessed by a devil!"

Fabien heard the sound of their mingled laughter, followed by low whispering and the noise of a door being cautiously opened. They were going into the dressing-room. Without stopping to think, he followed them, and entered just as Colombe, already seated, was obediently bending her neck. She got up, looking very pale, Turning to Cyrus Bargues, Fabien pointed to the door. Anger made him dumb, but his lower lip was trembling, and he gripped the dancer's arm so tightly that the latter made a face.

"What a *brute* you are, Dézaymeries!"

Fabien pushed him outside, shut the door and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. The look that he turned on Colombe was both tender and fearful, so tender that the girl imparted a tone of gentleness to the insolent words that she had made up her mind to fling at him.

"What right have you to interfere?"

He answered in a low voice but with the authority of a lover:

"I didn't want him to cut your hair."

She smiled like a schoolgirl remembering her history lesson, and said:

"You would rather see me dead at your feet than cropped? . . ."

Then she stopped short and her eyebrows drew together into a funny little frown.

"Since you're going away, Colombe, you must forget all the things that have been said against me in this house. . . . The people here are just a lot of swine. . . ."

She raised her eyes and looked him straight in the face:

"Doesn't that include you, too?"

He seemed abashed.

"It does," he stammered; "but at least I know it. *They've* no idea of the depths to which they have fallen. . . ."

"So much the better for them!"

"You *can't* know. Some day I'll tell you. I'm a miserable sinner, Colombe. Do you hear what I say? A sinner."

With a sad smile, and as though repeating a lesson, she said:

"A miserable sinner."

"Yes, Colombe, a *miserable* sinner, and a bit of a hypocrite too."

She saw such a look of shame in the dark, virile face that she made as though to raise her hands—perhaps with the intention of taking it between them, of drawing it to her—then let them fall to her sides. Stunned, her arms hanging, the child stood there, motionless beneath the crude light of the enamelled dressing-room which was filled with the untidiness of clothes hurriedly changed. Pots of make-up and various brushes lay all over the table. A bottle of scent with its cork out was slowly evaporating. A thermometer was floating on the soapy water of the bath. The place was so small and so cumbered that they were standing very close together. Colombe, looking as though she had no resistance left in her, said:

"What do you want me to do?"

"Take this sponge and wipe the rouge from your cheeks," he said, as though that were the most pressing need of the moment.

"There!"

"And now the black round your eyes."

"It's done!"

"And the red from your lips."

"What next?"

She obeyed him like someone walking in their sleep. He asked her whether she liked being with her mother in Brussels.

"Mamma is the kind of person you would like," she answered, as though she were familiar with all the tastes of this young man, to whom she had spoken only twice before. "The idea that I'm with my guardian makes her wild! I wish you could read her letters. She's afraid I shall learn bad habits here. She's glad, of course, that my guardian should take an interest in me, but she's worried about my soul. . . ."

"Don't leave her, Colombe—not until I come and fetch you."

"Fetch me?"

She smiled at him, her face transfigured, cleansed, fresh. The only colour in her cheeks now came from the young blood flowing in her veins, from the love rising in her heart. Her eyelids fluttered as with a sign of assent. She scarcely more than whispered her address, but Fabien remembered it. They said no more, but stood there looking at one another. They did not know that, at that very moment, Fanny, to whom Cyrus had murmured, "If you want to see two love-birds, go along to your dressing-room," had risen from her chair and was coming towards them. They did not hear the rustling of her dress. She pushed open the door. The two young people were not in one another's arms when she came in, were not even touching, but as they stood facing one another, love blazed in their faces, so that it dazzled her. For a moment she closed her eyes, then, with a smile, turning to Colombe, she said:

"Your guardian's waiting for you, my dear."

She took her by the hand and led her away. Fabien sighed. There would be no dramatics—at the most, perhaps, a scene. It would not be difficult for him to defend himself. Colombe and he had been doing nothing wrong. He avoided going back to the drawing-room, but got his overcoat and left the house.

He leaned over the parapet and looked at the river. The surface was popply, and the reflected lights were broken. His eyes took in the bare branches, the sleeping houses, the stars. A clear road was opening through his darkness. He knew now the way he must take, but it would be rough with briars and underbrush and torn roots. Back in his room, he prayed—at long last he could pluck up courage to do that! Then he lay down, not as heretofore, like a corpse, but curled up on one side, with his two hands pressed to his heart, as though they were holding something in, though what he did not know.

In the very early hours of the next morning someone threw the door open very suddenly and turned on the light. Sitting up in bed, he recognized Cyrus Bargue, who was still in evening-dress.

"My dear, something *frightful's* happened. You must get up at once! Fanny's been and swallowed a whole lot of opium and digitalin and heaven knows what else. I gather that there is still hope, but she won't let the doctor touch her unless you come. . . ."

His eyes never left Fabien all the while that the young man was hunting for his clothes.

"Women with a taste for suicide, my dear, are upsetting only if you attach importance to what happens to them. My own view is that it is best to leave them to their fate. Everyone has a right to die if he wants to, don't you agree? *Actually*, death usually *does* simplify matters so much for the survivors. Take your own case. . . ."

"Shut up, for heaven's sake! I don't want to hear another word from you. You give me the horrors! Is the car there?"

"It's waiting. I *adore* you when you're angry. But you can be terribly *rough*, you know. I really felt quite a *worm* yesterday evening. You're nothing but a great brute, really, but then all interesting people are."

The car slipped through the dawn. All the way along the river Fabien felt angry with himself for being so acutely aware of the

crisp, sad beauty of the empty city, while Cyrus Bargues sat at his side dreamily quoting:

L'aurore grelottante en robe rose et verte
S'avançait lentement sur la Seine déserte.

The front-door was half open. Donald Larsen, his shirt-front rumpled, his tie askew, was on the look-out for their arrival. He told them not to make a noise. Colombe, he said, was asleep, and on no account must she know what had happened. At the door of the bedroom he took Fabien by the arm, leaned with his enormous bulk till he was so close that the young man could smell his breath, which reeked of tobacco and spirits, and said:

"She's *got* to live—see?"

He added that he couldn't put off his own or the girl's departure. He made it quite clear that if Fanny were to die he would hold Fabien responsible.

"She's *got* to live!"

Fabien uttered no protest. The man filled him with terror and loathing. He looked like a cat with its ears laid back, and spitting. The sound of Fanny struggling for breath on the other side of the door could not take the mind from another room where Colombe lay sleeping.

XIII

"NO, don't draw the curtains, and don't come any closer. Sit down over there in that beam of sunlight. It's enough for me if I can just look at you."

Fabien, from the other side of the room, could see the thin face among the pillows. His thoughts turned to the woman with whom he had once travelled across Europe. He could feel her eyes upon him. They affected him like a physical contact. He begged her, now that she was well again, to get up.

"No," she said: "leave me at least *that* consolation, to lie still, to doze, to sleep. I'm going to be sensible, Fabien, truly I am. I was hateful, I was grotesque—that especially: but you don't have to worry now. I have learned at last to wait patiently until the end comes . . . but that is all I can do—just wait. Please realize that. I saw Heinemann, the dealer, this morning: you know whom I mean, don't you? He's going to sell everything I've got here, bit by bit. It'll be a slow business and will last as long as I shall. I like to think of ending my days in a completely empty room. . . . But one thing you must promise—to come every day and just sit in that chair for a few minutes. I want to learn again how to love you as I loved you once in your mother's room. . . . I think it was you, probably, who made me realize, in those days, how satisfying a refuge a shut room could be, a bed, with the monotonous ticking of a clock and the whisper of a dying fire, with shadows moving on the walls and ceiling. Do you remember how you used to revel in your childish ailments? No more games in an icy playground, you used to say, no more masters, no more little school friends."

Fabien remembered the nights when he had kept his mouth tight shut so as not to cough, when he had lain for what seemed an infinity in an uncomfortable position so as to avoid waking his mother and making her anxious. When the doctor had leaned down to listen to his heart his beard had smelled of toilet-vinegar. He had been able to see the man's scalp as though through a magnifying-glass. The Christmas Annual for '87 had contained *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and the one for '94, *Moustique*. There had been other stories as well, two of which, he recollected, had been called *Chan-Ook* and *Maltaverne*.

When he found himself once again in the street he felt as though he had returned from some distant land, bringing the old Fanny with him. She seemed emptied now of all desires. She no longer wanted him. How strange that was! So far there had been no answer to the long letter he had written to Colombe. Her long silence should have surprised him, but he had had no

time for wondering. He awaited her reply without impatience. His lovely dream was on the point of becoming a rather formidable reality. Should he say anything about Colombe to Madame Dézaymeries? What was the point in telling her that the girl's father was Fanny's second husband, or that she was a natural child? Madame Dézaymeries would consent to no compromise with her standards. Prejudices can be overcome, but not principles, and Fabien knew that in his mother's case, what the world called prejudices were founded in reason and solidly built on foundations which, to her mind, showed no crack. He was amazed to detect within himself no movement of rebellion. Often, now, he let his imagination dwell on the child who would be his son, a child with Larsen's china-blue eyes and Larsen's complexion, which looked as though the blood were oozing through the skin. He must, all the same, make *some* approach to the subject, must indicate, when next he wrote to his mother, that he was contemplating marriage. But his letters were always so short. . . . And, suddenly, he blushed. He who, as a child, had never been guilty of a lie, had not dared to tell his mother that he had left the École des Chartes, had, in fact, quite shamelessly given her details of a purely imaginary success in the quarterly examination. . . . Away with the memory of such cowardice! . . . He must try to concentrate his thoughts on his wild pigeon. . . .

He was obsessed, too, by worry of a different kind, though he did his best to see it only as a rather bizarre oddity. Was Fanny really and truly cured of him? Did she sincerely see him only as the small boy he once had been, or was she playing a deep game? 'What does it matter?' he said to himself. 'The important thing is that you are free at last. No need, now that you are tied no longer to that ageing body, to worry about being a dirty little beast.' But there were times, especially at night, as he lay in his lonely bed, when he found his mind dwelling on the thought of the body which once he had so loathed. What is it in our nature that urges us to repeat gestures that used to make us feel

physically sick? It is impossible to judge of the damage done until the storm has passed. Now that Fanny had broken loose, had withdrawn into herself and made the great renunciation, the poor young man could turn his eye inward and mark the incurable wound from which the blood still oozed. Accustomed, ever since the age of seven, to making a meticulous examination of his conscience, to the workings of casuistry in its most subtle forms, he was completely ignorant of the crude mechanism of what the world calls love, of an emotion which can so order matters that an abhorred mistress whom we long to throw overboard can, quite suddenly—if so be she take the initiative and, without a word of warning, anticipate our contemplated desertion—become precious in our eyes. When that happens a sudden hunger treads hard upon the heels of our satiety. Fabien believed himself to be precisely as he had been before embarking on a life of sin. He was utterly unaware of the new man within him who lived subject to a new law. That was why, when the existence of this stranger was revealed, the fact of it struck like a thunderbolt.

He had come one day, rather earlier than usual, to the Quai Debilly. The nurse asked him to wait until Fanny should be ready, and he sat in the empty drawing-room, a prey to impatience. He thought that he could best rid himself of his obsession by showing Fanny some sign of tenderness, by testing her, by putting temptation in her path.

Consequently it was with considerable nervousness that he approached the bed.

She pushed him away.

"No, Fabien, no: sit down in your usual chair. I like it so much better when you can only guess what I look like."

All the time that she was speaking in her husky voice, he was saying to himself: 'She wouldn't be afraid of my seeing her if she had really stopped loving me.'

"At least let me hold your hand, Fanny."

She stretched out her small, bare hand, but it no longer

trembled in his own. While he faintly pressed it, she went on talking in that voice that invalids always use when they are interested in nothing but themselves:

"I had a little chicken this morning, and I actually enjoyed it."

He increased the pressure, and she gently withdrew her hand before proceeding:

"How odd it all is. . . . After that other time I tried to kill myself I never really regained the zest of living, but now, when I'm a great deal older, it has suddenly come back!"

"Look at me, Fanny! You haven't once looked at me since I came into the room. . . ."

He remembered how, in the old days, it had been she, always, who had used such words to him.

Very gently she said:

"That was on purpose, my dear. I must get used to not seeing you. . . . I saw enough to tell me how you are. . . . You ought to get away into the country . . . you're not looking at all well."

"I don't want to leave you alone."

"I think the cure is complete, Fabien. But I shan't know for certain until you have been away from me for some time. . . ."

A hint of the old chiding note which had marked their former quarrels crept into his voice as he replied:

"I know why you want to send me away!"

She flashed him a questioning look, and he went on:

"You may as well admit that it's because of Colombe. You want to punish me. . . ."

Once more she stared at him, then struggled into a sitting position and covered her eyes and mouth with her two hands. Between the splayed fingers there came a sound, but whether it was a laugh or a sob he could not tell.

"You dare mention that name to me. Oh, what a little f-fool you are!" (She stammered slightly over the word.) "And, anyhow, you're entirely wrong, because I don't care *that* for your Colombe, especially now when I realize that you are just like the rest of them. . . . Oh, Fabien, Fabien! there was a time when I

thought of you as belonging to a different race. You may be a pious little fanatic on the surface, but underneath you're just the same sort of beast—yes, I mean that—the same sort of beast as all those others who start wanting to get their victim back into their clutches the moment it's stopped yowling!"

How truly had this old purveyor of love summed up love's mechanism! Brooding there over the gawky youth before her, her astute and knowing glance fixed on his thin cheeks and passion-worn face, she said again:

"Just like the rest of them! Just like the rest of them!"

He sat in a species of silent stupor, he who had been used to causing pain, not suffering it. At last he stuttered out:

"All the same, you tried to kill yourself because of me, because of her—you can't deny that!"

She broke in on him:

"That put the lid on it! Yes, I suppose my suicide would have been a feather in your cap. . . . How you'd hate it if I told you it had been just a put-up job! But don't worry; you're perfectly right. The sight of you and her together was more than I could stand. . . . What a fool I was! I wanted at all costs to tear that picture out of my mind, but how thankful, how terribly thankful, I am that I failed! I can be at peace now. I know that I'm stronger than you are. What does it matter now if your Colombe had been sent back to her convent for another two years! What, didn't you know? Then she's not as sharp as I thought her, though of course Donald never leaves anything to chance, and I expect he's taken pretty good care to have a watch kept on her letters. But what does it matter? I said to myself: 'In two years' time he'll have forgotten all about her!' And I thought I knew men! I should have said—in two days!"

She was expecting him to utter some sort of protest, to invoke the absent girl: but he said nothing.

Their eyes met. The young man she saw before her seemed to be a complete stranger, a lover who now, after all these months, was really suffering because of her. There were tears in

his eyes, and she almost felt inclined, for the first time in her life, to feel sorry for him. But her pity would not have been quite sincere, for there would have been in it a hint of that satisfaction we all feel when we think, 'Well, it's his turn now, poor wretch!'

"Forgive me, my dear, but you really are too ridiculous. I poisoned your existence with my threats of suicide. Then, at last, I actually did something about it. I failed, and suddenly I woke up, free at last, though not of my fondness, if that's any comfort to you. And all through that terrible time, when I really thought that everything was over, life seemed sweeter to me than ever before. You can't have any idea what it is like to see sunlight on a window when one is conscious of it only at a great distance and through gathering shadows. Yes, I was free at last and saved! Lying here in a sort of animal stupor, I took stock of my madness. Thanks to my drowsiness, to the numbness that paralysed all my physical senses, I could sit in judgment on myself. What a terrible injury I had done you! 'He must go back to his mother,' I said to myself, looking at the misery in your face. 'You must try to have for him the same innocent love as when he was a little boy.' It seemed to me almost easy to do that. I once heard someone say that the wisdom of old age consists in being able to see the difference between pleasure and love."

He listened to her, biting his short moustache, worrying at it with his fingers. At last, in a hard and arrogant tone, he put a question:

"Am I the only person you allow to come and see you?"

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because I know what you are. You can't live without some man . . . you never have been able to. If you're turning your back on me now, it's because you've found somebody better worth your while!"

She was so taken aback that for a moment she made no answer. To herself she murmured: 'It's hardly credible!' She stretched her hand to her bedside lamp and switched it on. Then, tilting back the dark silk shade, she lay silently staring at the

stranger in her room, with his tousled hair, his shoes, and the bottoms of his trousers caked with mud, a lunatic look in his eyes. She remembered all those many times when she had praised his looks, and he had said: "I'm just like any mule-driver you might meet on the roads round my home." Yes, that was precisely what he *was* like—a young mule-driver.

"You really must be going out of your mind, Fabien! Whom else *should* I see? I have given orders that no one else is to be admitted except you and Cyrus Bargues. But his season at Covent Garden begins in a week's time, and he's off on Friday. Besides, Cyrus Bargues, I ask you!"

"Who's your doctor?"

"Why not add, my concierge, my postman! I've had just about as much as I can stand. Go and get some air into your lungs. I'm still pretty weak, you know."

Hesitatingly he went to the door, and stopped. In the light of the lamp he could see her hand fumbling at the sheet. She must have turned away for he caught the glint of her tumbled hair. He used to tell her that it was far too yellow, but at this moment all he wanted was to plunge his face in it.

Suddenly he heard her laugh, and asked her what it was she found so amusing.

"Oh, you're still there, are you?"

"Why are you laughing?"

"Listen to me, Fabien, and don't be angry. I was thinking how you used to reproach me for alienating you from God. I shall be pretty invalidish for the next few weeks, and then it will be Easter. Thérèse is waiting for you. . . . You're not going on playing the part of the prodigal son, are you?"

She heard the door of her room slam, and, a few moments later, the door leading to the stairs. Did she feel sorry that she could not run after him? She took up a hand-mirror and looked long at her temples, her neck, her eyelids, her cheeks—stroking them with her fingers.

XIV

HE walked along the street with his overcoat open and his hat pulled down over his eyes, and as he went he said to himself: 'She's right: it's never once occurred to you that the road lies open, that there's nothing now to stop you from finding your way back into the life of grace.' This forgetfulness showed him, far more clearly than would have done the sense of having committed a fearful crime, how far he had fallen. Had he lost his faith? Of what use is faith if it is not lived? What value has an intellectual system, a theory of the universe, be it never so perfunctory, if one does not guide one's conduct by its rules? 'You're a corpse, you're beginning to stink already: there's not the slightest hint in you of any desire to rise again, nothing but this maniacal craving, this longing to be convinced that you still exercise an abominable influence over Fanny. You loathe her, but you won't give up the power of life and death. You're just like all the other swine—only worse!'

Fabien Dézaymeries did not see that in one essential point he differed from the majority of his fellows, in the fact that he was clear-sighted, lucid, and could gaze without flinching into his own heart. The scrupulous care that he had given, since his childhood days, to the examination of his motives, to the confession of the tiniest impure thought; the readiness he had always shown to blacken himself rather than run the risk of leaving undisclosed the smallest blemish (he had always been terrified of concealing a sin), kept him now from all danger of resting content with deceptive appearances. Most lovers would have gloried in their loyalty to an old mistress, would have waxed sentimental and self-satisfied over the realization that they were more capable than they had ever thought they could be of a love that was deep and sincere. He saw through all such illusions, and plumbed the hateful depths of his own nature where lurked the monstrous

feelings that were not even sure of their own identity, such dark regions as those in which two young women may suddenly be forced to realize that what they took for friendship is really passion. He saw now just how much rancorous hatred there was in this suddenly renewed craving for Fanny. How terribly youth can torture itself! It complains because it is fated to drag after itself a huddle of chained slaves whose weight lies heavy on its movements, yet, no sooner is it freed from them than it bewails the absence of those very victims who once gave living proof of its power.

Only when he reached his bedroom door did he awake from this long process of meditation. Among the letters waiting for him he recognized an envelope addressed in his own writing. It contained the letter he had written to Colombe on the very day of her departure, and here it was, returned to him. Although he had been careful to put his address on a corner of the envelope, somebody, who could not have been Colombe, had opened it and read its rather foolish sentiments. How far he felt this evening from all those sugar-sweet protestations! He was not in the least tempted to make even a gesture that might have the effect of averting an obstructive fate. He knew that the battle for Colombe was lost, but knew too that it was in his own heart that he had been defeated. No external obstacles could have stood against his love, but he could find now, within himself, not the tiniest trace of that small and still-born creature. A girl, still scarcely more than a child, had been the means of revealing to him the existence of carnal delights that might be blessed and sanctified, of caresses from which the shadowy angels would not avert their gaze; but he realized now that this young and charming human being, the only one of her kind whom he had ever known, had been the occasion rather than the object of that great surge of feeling.

The other letter he dared not open, though the neat handwriting was dear to him. It was the same that, in the old days, he had spelled out on the "excuse cards" which had followed hard on the heels of his childish illnesses, the cards that he would

have to hand up to the headmaster: *Madame Dézaymeries begs the Abbé Bernard to be so very kind as to excuse her son Fabien, who has been confined to the house with influenza.* It was the same as that which he had covered with tears and kisses during prep. all through that month of October when he and Joseph had been sent to school as boarders because their mother had stayed on in the country. He had no doubt that this letter which he dared not open had been written, as all her letters to him were, in the belief that it was addressed to a frank and honest boy, to the young Christian who now lay murdered, though she clung obstinately to the conviction that he was still alive. It was true that each time he had gone home she had suffered cruelly because he seemed a stranger, because his voice sounded as though it were reaching her from a distance, because a hot fire glowed in his shifty glances, a fire that was not the sacred flame which she had kindled in his heart. But scarcely had he gone away again than the old lady unconsciously set herself to revivify the ghost of the innocent child who had gone to sleep each night with his two hands, linked by a rosary, crossed upon his breast.

He glanced nervously at the first few lines. No, *this* letter was not addressed to that pious, docile boy. For two months now his own letters had been so short, their tone so dry (especially since he had lied to her about the École des Chartes), that the old lady could not but feel a certain foreboding. "My dear son: I cannot recognize your voice in the words you send me. If your letters were not in your writing I should think they came from a stranger. There was a time when you used to confide in your old mother. I know exactly when that stopped—it was after your first year at school. All the same, up to a month or two ago you did at least tell me about the little events of your life. But now it is only too obvious that you are impatient to get quit of a tiresome duty. Don't you think I can tell that from the shortness of the lines, from their being more widely spaced, from the manifest tricks you've been reduced to in order to cover four pages in the quickest possible time? Someone who knows you

said to me the other day: 'When a child no longer confides in his mother, you can be quite sure that there is more on his mind than he wants to tell.' I protested. I reminded the good Father of the notorious Dézaymeries reticence. My poor husband was just the same, and never really unburdened himself. . . . Still, I am not sufficiently convinced myself to be able to reassure our saintly friend. I have never dared to tell him that you refused to communicate on the anniversary of Joseph's death. . . . My dearest boy, I have been thinking a great deal and praying a great deal. I suppose it was partly a mother's pride that led me to think that you are different from other men, that evil is powerless to touch you. . . . If I am wrong, forgive me for making a foolhardy judgment. If my fear is justified, where should you find a surer refuge than in a mother whose love for you is so great that it may well be a cause of offence in the eyes of a jealous God? But Easter is not far off, and on the Thursday in Holy Week we shall, as we always have done every year, kneel together at the Lord's table, and my child in his weakness will take the bread that gives strength. . . ."

Fabien found it impossible to read further. He crumpled the letter in his hand, and began to walk up and down the low, dark room. His eyes were like those of some vicious animal. Could he have seen them in a mirror he would have been terrified. 'Oh, why can't she leave me alone!' he muttered. 'I'm old enough in all conscience, and my troubles are my own concern. . . . If she really expects to see me at Easter . . .' It was inconceivable that he should go home. What possible excuse could he make for not taking Communion? He would be quite incapable of enduring in silence his mother's searching enquiries. The very thought of the questions she would ask him made him grind his teeth. But what carried most weight with him was the need he felt not to leave Paris without being certain that the other woman was still at his mercy.

'All the same, you don't love her, and you know it.' So much the worse, then. There was no use in trying to probe *that* mystery.

There was nothing he could do to fight against the urgent demand of his whole being that the former slave should not be allowed to escape him, still less that she should put her neck beneath a new yoke. A new yoke? At that very moment, while he was pacing his room, she was probably laughing at him with some man whom most certainly she would not keep sitting at a safe distance. Who was that unknown for whose sake she had been waiting in Venice, who had failed to turn up? Fabien had never bothered to find out his name. . . .

He took his coat and hat and rushed out into the street. At first he walked, then, mad with impatience, hailed a taxi and had himself driven to the Place de l'Alma. He strode along the dark Quay until he reached Fanny's house. A faint light showed behind her bedroom windows—the light of the reading-lamp. Perhaps, after all, there was no one with her. She couldn't be asleep at eight o'clock in the evening. Entering, he plucked up courage to question the concierge, who thought, though she couldn't be sure, that Madame was alone. . . .

He hung about for some time between the parapet and the trees of the deserted Quay.

Next day he made an immense effort not to ring at her door until three o'clock. He had decided to adopt an attitude of feigned indifference, as though on her alone it depended whether their relationship should remain unchanged, or whether they should draw their lives to a new pattern, see their existences in a new light. Nothing should stand in the way of her finding in him a Fabien drained of all the desire that she no longer felt: nothing should stand in the way of his finding in her the mournful charm of the fugitive from an outworn emotion. From the moment of his arrival he showed a gentle humility towards the woman to whom, in the days of their love, he had been hard and arrogant. He made it clear that he longed to be admitted to every trivial moment in the life of a mistress about whose movements he had formerly shown a lack of curiosity which had driven her almost into the arms of death.

"Who brought you that lilac?"

"I shouldn't have many flowers in this room if I depended on you to bring them. . . . It was Coco and the Princess. They looked in yesterday after you'd gone. The Princess is really kindness itself. Did I tell you that she's taking me with her into the country the day after to-morrow? I'm going to finish my convalescence at Cap Ferrat. She's got one of the loveliest gardens on that part of the coast. . . ."

Not a word did he utter. Whatever he did he must not show what he was feeling. She kept her gaze fixed upon the gawky, carelessly dressed, emaciated and bony youth with the bilious-looking eyes, and to herself she said: 'A mule-driver.' How strange it is to look at a face that we have loved when we love it no longer. Only a short while ago Fanny had been dying for the sake of this same mouth, of these same eyes, which had a glint in them when they smiled. She remembered the Sunday (only a fortnight gone) when she had felt that she would never stop crying, when, on her hands and on her cheeks, there had been the taste and the smell of an almost childlike sense of desolation. She had been quite unable to keep up any pretence, and when people she met and looked at with a haggard and a hunted eye had asked her what was wrong, the mask had fallen from her face as though torn away by the very violence of her feelings. "Please leave me alone," she had groaned; "it's nothing: it will pass"—though not, for a moment, imagining that anything could ever again bring balm to a torment, rather than endure which, she would choose to die.

Fabien went up to her, took her hand, and shyly asked whether the Princess would include him in her invitation.

"You must be mad! She detests you. . . . She thinks of you as my murderer! Besides, I'm going away to get cured, and it's of you I've got to get cured. . . ."

She freed her hand and moved across to the other side of the bed, so as to put a space between them. She remembered the time when the mere proximity of his body had set her

trembling, so that her teeth had chattered and her hands grown cold.

"Fabien, I'm going to show you that I'm not such a cat as you think me. I have news of Colombe. . . ."

"Ah!"

"Donald doesn't like the idea of leaving her at the Convent. It seems that she is passing through a highly emotional stage of religiosity, and he's afraid the good sisters may put ideas into her head."

He said nothing, and she went on:

"As a matter of fact, Thérèse is the only likely obstacle. I think I can persuade Donald without much difficulty. . . . Rather than see his daughter turn nun, as she seems bent on doing . . . after all, it wouldn't be at all a bad match for her, and I'm beginning to think that an affectionate and pious young girl might succeed in making you very happy."

"But what about you, Fanny?"

"Oh, I surrender all claims. I am prepared to go right out of your life. You will have been the last storm that I shall ever suffer. . . . I shall know what real peace means . . . the calm of smooth water after the buffetings of the gale! . . ."

But the flame of his youth refused to burn low, refused to come to terms with such extremities of wisdom. There was a mad look in his eyes as he strode across to the bed and imprisoned her in his arms as in a snare. She dared not struggle, but, inert and clear-headed, lay watching the young man who had once been so spoiled and indolent, and was now embarrassed, awkward in attack, and quelled by her coldness. She laughed, covering her eyes with her arm, and there was a note of uncontrolled hysteria in the sound such as he remembered to have heard when, long ago, on Christmas night, he had been kissed for the first time in the dark old house. . . . At last she grew calmer. Letting fall the arm that covered her face, she breathed out a sigh. She felt numbed but free. She was alone.

Fabien must have spent that night wandering along the deserted river bank near the Champ de Mars and the Magic City. It was not raining, but his clothing was drenched with mist. Just before dawn he found himself at his own door. Fumblingly he undressed, and when morning came was shivering with fever. When the maid arrived to do his room he asked her to put a jug of milk and some aspirin on the table, and leave him to sleep. He had always looked on illness as a soporific drug, a strange world in which he could lose himself, a road beckoning him to a rest without end. Who was it that had said to him that action is but another form of sleep? The restless persons of this world are but sleepers. Real life lies elsewhere. The odd thing was that he felt neither anxiety nor remorse. He kept on repeating to himself a single line of poetry: *Puisque c'est si peu nous qui faisons notre vie*. He felt deep sunk in security because nobody, nobody at all, would come. He had to struggle for his breath. Had he, perhaps, developed congestion of the lungs? He lay struck down by the weight of a deadening slumber, shot through with a sense of something that was almost dreaming, only to sink once more into a sort of burning torpor. Somebody, a man, opened the door. He saw Maïnz taking off his overcoat. He closed his eyes, making believe he slept. A cool hand was laid upon his forehead and fingers pressed his wrist. He heard Maïnz whispering on the landing, telling somebody the address of a doctor.

That night, after the doctor had gone, he opened his eyes and saw in an armchair the figure of the Jew whom he knew so little, watching beside his bed. At dawn it was still there, and came across to lift his head that he might drink. Another day the sick man opened his eyes and saw his mother. She leaned down to kiss him, and he recognized the mingled smell of lavender, naphtha-balls and orris-root which had always hung about the room where he and Joseph had said their evening prayers. Later, he was conscious of a priest whispering in his ear.

"A woman, my son?"

He made a sign of assent with his eyes.

"Married?"

"Yes. . . ."

The priest said: "I will return . . . offer up your life . . . Our Lord . . . your sufferings. . . ."

They gave him an injection of serum through the pleura, right into the affected lung. No one knew that he was rejoicing at his sufferings. Maïnz was talking to Madame Dézaymeries in the window. Fabien stirred, moved his lips, and at last was able to articulate:

"Maïnz——"

When the Jew leaned down above the bed, he made a supreme effort and managed to say:

"Don't judge the tree . . . rotten fruit. . . ."

He could say no more, and it occurred to Maïnz that Christ, maybe, had chosen to reveal Himself in the weakest of His vessels.

When he went down to dinner, Madame Dézaymeries put a question:

"Have you sent word to the College authorities?"

"There's no need; he sent in his resignation a month ago."

She showed no sign of amazement. Left to herself she gazed at the man she thought she had known so well. He lay now sleeping peacefully. The doctor had said that injections made directly into the lung can sometimes work miracles. When she had prepared the table for the Last Sacrament (which was to be brought during the night) she kneeled down. Her lips moved, but she could attach no meaning to her words. That morning she had found, tucked away in a drawer, a number of hairpins and a light-coloured tortoiseshell comb. "*Third Sorrowful Mystery*. . . . Where was I?" Fabien heard, as once in his childhood's dreaming, the click of the rosary which Madame Dézaymeries was holding like a skein of wool so as to be sure how far she had got in her "telling." But she found it impossible to concentrate on her devotions. She got up and took down from a shelf what she thought was her son's prayer-book. But it

turned out to be a small photograph album. She took it to the light, opened it, and turned the pages without making a sound, though she must have read the legends inscribed beneath each picture: *Fanny at the Lido; Fanny on the Piazetta; Fanny at San Francesco-del-Deserto; Our Gondolier; Our Room.*

Quite calmly she put the album back and kneeled down by the bed. She stayed there as motionless as though her body had been turned to stone. Her hollow cheeks had the grey colour of stone. At intervals she said, in a low voice, but very distinctly, "On me alone, on me alone. May it all be laid on me." She was remembering the little girl whom she had welcomed, forty years ago, in the old Dupouy house, and how she had loved her frivolity, her impertinent ways, her wild fits of temper. 'Was it not for those very vices, then scarcely developed, that she was dear to me, though I did not know it? No, I *did* know it, and later, when I took her in, I did not deceive myself. I refused to see that even then she was prowling round Fabien. Oh, please God let him live, if, by living, he may make atonement. But let him die if death will open the gates of heaven to him. But may Thy justice fall on me alone, miserable sinner that I am.'

Fabien still lay dozing. His nose was no longer twitching as it had been earlier, his hand upon the sheet was no longer flushed to a dark red. Thérèse heard a sound of whispering on the stairs, and, thinking it was the Sacrament, lit the two candles on the table that was covered with a cloth. She opened the door and took from the servant a light wicker basket addressed to Fabien Dézaymeries. The name on the card—Madame Donald Larsen—meant nothing to her, but even after all these years she recognized the thin, firm writing of the message that accompanied it: "From the happy land in which I have been born anew, I send to dear Fabien a thought of loyal affection." She tore the card into small pieces and threw them on the fire together with the paper in which the flowers had been wrapped. A flame leapt up. Then she thrust into the blaze great handfulls of gilliflowers,

mimosa and carnations, their stalks still wet, that they, too, might be consumed.

At that moment a young priest arrived. There was a devout expression on his face by reason of what he was carrying beneath his cloak. Thérèse dropped to her knees, still holding some flowers in her hand. For a moment she hesitated, then strewed them on the table and the carpet. The priest trod them under his muddy boots. It was necessary to rouse Fabien. He said that he felt better, and that there was a smell of crushed flowers in the room. His mother wrapped him in a shawl and supported his body while he stretched his waxen face to the Host. The quiet smile never left his lips. God was still in him when he sank once more into sleep. As the priest withdrew he noticed Maïnz standing outside the door, because he had not dared to enter the room.

All that night Madame Dézaymeries watched by her son as he lay sleeping peacefully. She thought that, maybe, the breast that has quivered with the ecstasies of passion had been chosen, as once had been the rim of a well, a publican's table, and that place of sin where the Son of Man had eaten and drunk because he had been sent to call sinners to repentance.

Towards the end of the spring it became possible to move Fabien to the heath country where the sun was already overpowering. From the month of June onwards the cicadas made it impossible for anyone to do more than slumber uneasily, and only when with the coming of evening the woods distilled their scent, did sleep come. As darkness deepened the air was filled with the smell of burned heather and brackish water. The Dézaymeries were expecting a visit from Jacques Maïnz at the end of July. One morning Fabien's mother gave him a letter from Fanny.

He said, averting his eyes: "What ought I to do?"

Perhaps he was thinking that he had in charge a human soul, that sin sometimes binds us to another like a Sacrament.

Madame Dézaymeries thought for a moment before replying: "We are of those who believe that a soul may be influenced at a distance by prayer and sacrifice."

She said no more, but the light of a great joy showed in her face as she watched the young man tear up the letter without so much as opening it. For a while after this frequent letters arrived from Fanny because Fabien made no effort to reply. It became a habit with him to tear them all up unread. For this seeming cruelty he should not be too harshly judged. In order that his mistress might be saved he had refused to open his heart to the call of human happiness, and already he was dead to the world. But for all his resolution the claims of the body could not be altogether stilled. For long months it had been gorged, how then, when it had once more woken to life, could it be kept from craving satisfaction? The real story of Fabien Dézaymeries should, properly speaking, begin at this point, for all that had gone before was in the nature of a prologue. But how is one to describe the secret drama of a man who struggles to subdue his earthy heritage, that drama which finds expression neither in words nor gestures? Where is the artist who may dare to imagine the processes and shifts of the great protagonist—Grace? It is the mark of our slavery and of our wretchedness that we can, without lying, paint a faithful portrait only of the passions.